RUSS FARRELL,

Over Mexico

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Books by Thomson Burtis

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RUSS FARRELL, TEST PILOT
RUSS FARRELL, CIRCUS FLYER
RUSS FARRELL, BORDER PATROLMAN
RUSS FARRELL OVER MEXICO

Courtesy of Educational Film Exchanges, Inc.

"You, Blackie, are the Hawk of Mexico,"
Russ asserted suddenly.

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THOMSON BURTIS

Motion Picture Edition of the

RUSS FARRELL SERIES

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FIRST EDITION

RUSS FARRELL
OVER MEXICO

CHAPTER I

AS THE little white freighter nosed its way up the lordly Panuco River, Lieutenant Russell Farrell was leaning over the rail, watching the slowly moving panorama of the north shore with eyes that were afire with interest and anticipation. This was the second time he had made this self-same trip, but his interest in the tropical country around him was even greater than it had been the first time.

At different intervals during his career as a pilot in the Army Air Service he had spent, all together, hundreds of hours patrolling the Rio Grande, and there had not been an hour of that time during which he had not, at some moment, gazed from his lofty perch over the far-flung wastes of Mexico and longed to explore them. His first visit to this country had been comparatively short; it had only whetted his zest for exploration. Now, as he realized that he was actually again down in the land that had fascinated him for years, he was as happy as only an enthusiastic young flyer could be.

That the unknown duties that awaited him promised excitement added the last touch to what constituted paradise for the red-blooded young airman.

The small white fruit steamer, which he had boarded at New Orleans three days before, was making slow progress under the hand of its Mexican pilot, and the broad-shouldered Farrell had plenty of time to drink in the scene before him. Though he had seen it all on his former trip to Tampico, it had lost none of its charm.

Great "tank farms" on both banks! The rolling shore line seemed to be covered with the huge fifty-five-thousand-barrel oil tanks. And just as on his former trip, here and there along the shore great black oil tankers were at anchor, while huge pipes, leading from the tanks, poured a ceaseless flow of oil into them.

Not a day passed, he knew, without a dozen tankers steaming slowly down the Rio Panuco to carry their precious freight to all parts of the earth. The great signs he saw, signs bearing the names of the majority of the great oil companies of the world, were evidence in themselves of the Gargantuan industry going on in the interior of Mexico.

He knew enough about the oil business to be

able to visualize the scenes a hundred miles away in the interior where the thousands of wells, flowing day and night, were supplying these tank farms with their precious contents. His heart leaped to the romance of it as he saw in his mind's eye pipe lines crisscrossing the country—thousands of men bending to their toil beneath the burning Mexican sun. Suddenly it seemed to him that, were he not a flyer, he would rather be a part of the industry that wrested its riches from the earth itself, undaunted by wilderness or desert or any other obstacle, than anything else in the world.

"Getting a kick out of it?" inquired a soft voice behind him and a portly young radio operator smiled understandingly at the eager Army man.

Russ nodded and his freckled face lit up with a typical Farrell grin. "I sure am," he admitted. "Look at those boats!"

Dozens of primitive little craft were plying busily to and fro across the wide river. Many of them were old stern-wheelers, carrying cargoes of laughing, sombreroed peons to their work. Battered little launches, weather-beaten rowboats, and flat scows were like so many water bugs on the surface of the water.

"Pretty busy little port," agreed the radio operator. "If I remember rightly, it was second only to New York last year in the volume of shipping that was handled."

"I can believe it." And Russ grinned again.

"Just down here on a little vacation?" the radio operator inquired.

"I don't exactly know," Russ answered guardedly. The letter that he had in his pocket had warned him to keep his own counsel and the Chief at Washington had told him, in no unmistakable terms, not to talk too much.

"You're not out of the Army, are you?"

Russ shook his head. He removed his Panama hat and the faint breeze ruffled his curly red hair slightly.

"No, I have a six months' leave without pay," he answered. "I had a pretty tough year and felt I needed a little vacation."

"Sort of fed up with flying, eh?"

"Gosh, no!" Russ exploded, and for an instant his unquenchable enthusiasm for the service he loved better than anything else in the world burned up so brightly that it fairly glowed in his face.

The radio operator grinned sympathetically.

"It's all right for them that like it," he stated. "Well, young fellow, there's Tampico."

The ship was rounding a bend, and once more before Farrell's fascinated eyes there appeared the gleaming white buildings of the most famous oil boom town in the world. His gaze traveled from the swarming docks up the hill to the heights. The city lay bathed in the golden Mexican sunlight, and from that distance it seemed like some colorful Oriental metropolis. Gaudily dressed peons swarmed on the wharves, unloading the half dozen big vessels tied up there. Along the water front the unpainted shacks of the peons seemed to extend for miles. Some of them were built on stilts over the water itself. Starting at the shore line and extending part way up the hill, there were great sheds through which crowds of people moved slowly. Russ knew they were the public markets.

"Busy places," the radio operator remarked.

Russ nodded. "And these are busy birds," he added with a grin as his gaze shifted to the blinding sky. "Did you ever in your life see so many buzzards!"

Up there, hundreds of the big birds were wheeling slowly over the town, and along the water front the telegraph and telephone wires

and scraggly trees seemed literally covered with them.

"Sure are scads of 'em," admitted the radio operator. "There are parts of Mexico that aren't so—er—sanitary."

As the ship crept up to the wharf and the false breeze generated by its progress died, the force of his remark was increased by the evidence of Russ's nostrils. The aroma that assailed them was not a pleasant one. Up on the hill there were the modern buildings that promised comfort and even luxury, but down here along the water front there was evidence of unutterable squalor.

"I know, of course," Russ said, half to himself, "that there are a lot of people in the interior that live a good deal like savages, but I can't get over the way these people down here in these shacks live. I believe it's worse."

"Well," the radio operator grinned, "I know I'd rather live in some thatched-roof hut out in the monte than in one of these town houses along the river. I take it you would, too. By the way, have you any friends here in Tampico?"

"Just one right now, and I expect he'll meet me," Russ told him, but even as he said the words he was wondering, for the hundredth time, whether or not he did have a friend.

They were warping into the dock now and his eyes swept the throngs of laborers eagerly. Suddenly they caught sight of a tall, slim figure, topped by a big white Stetson, shouldering its way forward. The Stetson tilted back to reveal a boldly reckless face and long, narrow dark eyes, which focused on Farrell.

"Oh, Blackie!" Russ shouted and the next second Blackie Williams was waving his hat in the old, casual gesture Russ knew so well.

As the ship was tying up to the dock the flyer's eyes rested for a long time on that graceful figure below.

Tall and broad-shouldered, Williams was as debonair as ever. He was dressed in riding boots and breeches and a thin khaki shirt, open at the neck. Below his Stetson, his face, as always, seemed to be jeering mockingly at the world. An aquiline nose swept down over a wide mouth that seemed to droop on one side, as though smiling sardonically at life in general. His lean face was tanned a deep mahogany. When he shoved back his hat, the gesture revealed thick wavy black hair and brought out more clearly the lines of strength in the face of a born adventurer.

He stood below quietly as he smiled up at Russ, and his expression of saturnine mockery

disappeared for a moment. There seemed to be real pleasure back of the smile that suddenly lit up his dark face.

"See you in a few minutes!" Russ yelled, and his voice was vibrant with anticipation as he left the rail to attend to his baggage.

He wondered exactly why that warm feeling of contentment had rushed over him at the sight of Blackie Williams—wondered the more because of tiny doubts that would not stay down.

"Don't be a fool!" he admonished himself, and he scarcely realized that that same little element of doubt subtly increased the anticipation that had now turned him into an eager boy who was almost unbearably impatient to find out what his mysterious mission might be.

"Well set up youngster," grunted the stolid Norwegian captain to the radio operator, and that portly young gentleman nodded. For the moment, there was a wistful look in his eyes, as they followed Russ across the narrow deck. The pilot's wide-shouldered body moved with a sort of pantherlike grace and the bounding vitality within him seemed to radiate from every part of it.

Russ moved swiftly, as he collected his bags, said good-bye to the crew and half ran down the

gangplank in front of a procession of Mexican boys who were carrying his luggage. The next second he was shaking hands with Williams.

"How's the lieutenant?" Williams grinned, with genial mockery. "First time I ever saw you out of uniform. That white suit certainly does make that hair look three shades redder than a mad rooster's comb!"

"If we're talking about colors," Russ returned, "I might rise to remark that your face is about three degrees darker than a hearse at midnight."

"Sun, my boy, sun," Williams returned. "Well, let's get under way for the customs office, because we haven't a great deal of time."

"Huh?" grunted Russ. "What do you mean? Ships don't come in on schedule time exactly, do they? Have we a luncheon engagement or something?"

"No," Williams told him, as they made their way through the small crowd of Mexicans. "But it just so happens that three or four of the big bugs you may decide to work for are gathered right now at the Colonial Club and said they would stick around until noon, on the chance that the canoe you arrived in might make it to the dock this morning."

Russ glanced at the profile of his companion,

who was slightly ahead of him. Seen from the side, Blackie's face was more hawklike than ever. His square jaw receded ever so slightly below that boldly curving nose and he looked exactly what Russ had found him to be—an indomitable adventurer to whom the world was an oyster, and, with all his faults, a gentleman unafraid. That Russ should think so, after all that had happened between them, was a miracle to the red-headed young flyer, and again he wondered whether he was right or not.

Blackie had proved himself time and again and yet—what he had been——

Russ forgot all this, however, as he went through customs inspection, which Blackie facilitated for him by fluent conversation in Spanish. Russ noticed the extraordinary politeness of the two customs inspectors and marveled somewhat, because it was in such contrast to the attitude of the half dozen soldiers in ill-fitting khaki uniforms who were lounging in the background.

"I may be wrong," he half whispered in Blackie's ear, as they stood to one side of his open grips, "but it seems to me as though some of those boys over there were not looking at us with much pleasure at my arrival."

Blackie glanced at him and his lip drooped. "It's not so much you who's annoyin' 'em as it is me," he stated.

Russ could not ask the questions that came crowding to the tip of his tongue because inspection was over, but there were tingles chasing themselves up and down his spine as they went out to the car Blackie had ordered. He felt as though he would burst if he did not learn more about the situation within the next few seconds, and as they climbed into the car his words fairly tumbled over themselves.

"Listen, Blackie, come clean, will you?" he begged. "I got a letter asking me if I would like to do some flying down here, saying it could be fixed up with Washington, that I would enjoy it and make some money, and the skids were greased in Washington, and here I am and I don't know a thing about it."

"Well, you're here, aren't you?" Blackie drawled as they started up the rugged dirt road that led up the hill. "Don't think I'm so dumb—I knew you'd get here quicker if you didn't know what it was all about than you would if you did. What brought you here, young fellow, was excitement, and the more mystery I could throw around it the more exciting it was to you. Don't kid me!"

Russ grinned.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted. "It must be O. K. because Washington was all right. But, gosh, Blackie, what is it?"

"Wait till we get to yonder white hotel, the name of which is the 'Riviera,' " Blackie told him. "Then we'll park your grips. We'll go from there to the Colonial Club and you can get the news right from headquarters. I hope you'll like it.

"This Riviera," he went on casually, "has a bath for every room. The other big hotel is more in the center of things but there are at least three good reasons why you won't park your luggage there. One is that the Riviera has a bath for every room and the other hotel has about two baths for the whole hotel and they don't work, except at intervals.

"The second reason is that every American in town would see you in a short time in the other hotel, and some of them might be stool pigeons.

"The third reason," he continued, turning a corner on two wheels, "I won't tell you now, because you might not understand its importance."

He glanced sideward, his mouth drooping quizzically, as though enjoying Russ's mystification.

Russ's blue eyes blazed with questions.

"If you don't shoot the works," he finally declared, "I won't even go near that Colonial Club, whatever it is. Come on, Blackie, don't kid me any more. What's the lay?"

Blackie slowed down the car. They were driving through a paved street between low, white adobe buildings that were almost windowless. Through an occasional open door a patio, far within, was discernible.

"Remember a few months ago I was trying to get back some money I had been crooked out of by more or less strong-arm methods down here, and you came down and knocked me off?" he asked slowly.

Russ nodded. There was a brief silence, and a thousand memories swarmed through Russ's racing brain. The man beside him, technically an outlaw for more than a year for reasons that Russ found understandable if not really excusable, had always had a curious influence on him. They had waged a thousand battles against each other during Russ's days on the Border Patrol, but they had been fought as though they represented rival countries at war. Nevertheless, that he should be proud to call Blackie Williams his friend could not be explained on any other basis than that of

a strong personal liking that took little heed of what Blackie was—or had been, at least.

He had seen Blackie return a fortune to the men he had stolen it from, after they had first stolen it from him by technically legal methods, and knew that the unreadable Texan had decided he would feel better if he did so. Surely, that showed what he was, and yet his reference to his outlaw past troubled Russ. There swept over him a feeling that a great disillusionment would come to him in Williams' next words. He waited tensely.

Finally, Blackie spoke.

"Well," he said quietly, his drawl more pronounced than usual. "Some other egg is doing what I did on a bigger scale. It looks as though a little war is going to be fought in the sky over this flea-bitten country and as though the notorious Blackie Williams is going to be on the side of the law. You're down here because I'd like mighty well to have you help me and about seven big oil companies and the Mexican government don't object at all, at all. These oil fields are about one hundred and twenty miles long, and somewhere in 'em or over 'em there's a spot for Russ Farrell to do his stuff if he wants to!"

CHAPTER II

A HALF hour later, the little car that Blackie was driving drew up in front of a building just off the Plaza and Blackie waved his hand in one of his customary negligent gestures.

"This is the spot," he proclaimed, "where your curiosity shall be satisfied, and quickly."

Russ climbed out and followed Blackie up some stairs. He had scarcely noticed Tampico as they had driven through it, for his mind was racing ahead and a thousand possibilities had passed in review before him. It was a tense, excited young flyer who entered the simply furnished confines of the Colonial Club. Blackie had explained that it was the rendezvous of the leaders of the army of men who were conquering, foot by foot, the primeval jungle from which they garnered flowing gold.

The club seemed almost deserted but Blackie led him to a small room in the rear. Russ entered to face the inspection of three coatless men who were sitting around a table, talking.

"Greetings, gentlemen," Blackie drawled

equably. "Mr. White, may I present Lieutenant Farrell? Mr. White, Russ, is general manager of the Korejan Oil Company, the biggest single company in Mexico.

"Mr. Ransome, Lieutenant Farrell. Mr. Ransome is the vice-president and general manager of the Gamble Company, owned by an English syndicate and a very large company.

"Mr. Harris, Lieutenant Farrell. Mr. Harris is general field superintendent for the Texas Company of Mexico. These three gentlemen, Russ, have been appointed a committee to handle certain matters for all the oil interests that have concessions in Mexico."

As the three men shook hands, Russ was conscious of the fact that they were scrutinizing him closely.

White was an enormous man, more than six feet in height and large in proportion. Russ's first impression was that he was very fat but later on he realized that the oil man's flesh was firm and hard and that his huge bulk was far from flabby. His eyes were so encased in flesh that they looked small but they were very keen and cool as they rested on the flyer.

Ransome of the Gamble Company looked

more like a city business man than an oil pioneer. He was rather small and stocky, dressed with precise correctness in a spotless linen suit, and his square face was crossed with rather ornate spectacles.

Harris was tall and spare and angular, his face tanned to a deep mahogany, with remarkably keen gray eyes looking forth beneath bushy, iron-gray eyebrows.

"Sit down," White invited them in a slightly wheezy voice. He wiped the perspiration from his glistening bald head and his huge jowls seemed to become larger as he smiled. His mouth looked ridiculously small in that expansive face. almost like a baby's.

"We haven't much time," he went on. "How much have you told him, Williams?"

"Very little," drawled Williams, throwing one leg over the arm of his chair. "You'd better give him the works."

He had removed his Stetson and his thick black hair was in a tangled mass, some of it falling over his forehead. He leaned back quietly, smoking a cigarette, and scarcely seemed to be paying attention as the big oil man started talking.

Russ's eyes flitted briefly to the other two men and then came to rest on White's face, there to remain.

As White talked, the dynamic force concealed in that apparently slothful body became more and more apparent to the young flyer, and he felt as though those small gray eyes were accurately appraising the effect upon him of every word spoken.

"The situation," White began, "is this: This rascallion, Williams, here, as you know, started something a year ago. You're aware of the fact that the fields around here are more than a hundred miles long. And you know, don't you, that the country is infested with everything from small gangs of bandits, who usually pass themselves off as down-trodden men collecting funds to start a revolution, to real armies of four or five hundred under the leadership of so-called generals, who are really on the level about doing a little government baiting?"

Russ nodded.

"Well," White went on, leaning back in his oversize chair, "of course, all the big companies have to transport hundreds of thousands of dollars every week to the camps for the pay rolls. Our pay cars were robbed so frequently that we

started flying the pay rolls to the various camps. Then Mr. Williams, dog-gone him, having been given what he considered a crooked deal, though it was all a matter of business, decided to get back the money he'd lost. Being a flyer, he turned into an aërial highwayman; and you, being a friend of the men who owned the ships we used to fly the money around the fields, made a quick trip down here and showed him the error of his ways. Am I right?"

Russ nodded, unsmilingly. He darted a glance at the untroubled Blackie.

"If you want to know it," Russ said, flatly, "I think Williams did get a crooked deal, although I don't approve of the methods he used to get back what belonged to him. But he returned the money he had taken, didn't he—sent it back to your companies?"

The flyer was leaning forward belligerently as he defended his friend.

White, looking into his eyes, smiled slightly. Ransome and Harris glanced at each other, the hint of a smile on their lips.

"He did!" White said soothingly. "Now he's working for us."

Williams' lips drooped on one side.

"I found out it was better to play with you than

against you," he said calmly. "Let's let that other thing rest."

"Well," White went on, playing with his watch fob absently, "as I said before, Blackie here apparently put ideas into people's heads. To make a long story short, somewhere in the interior of this country there's a hidden airdrome and how many ships are in it we don't know. What we do know, though, is that our pay roll ships are held up on an average of once a week and that we are losing fifteen to twenty-five thousand dollars in cash money every week.

"There's more than one flyer in the crew and more than one ship. We know that, because two of our ships have been held up simultaneously and once even three.

"More than that, this gang gets information, and exact information, about what we plan to do to circumvent them; gets it in a manner we can't understand. How many stool pigeons they have in their employ, and how many of them are right in our own offices, we can't tell. How many ground men they have, we don't know. An amazing part of the situation is that, running around this town of Tampico right now, there are at least a dozen members of the gang and that somewhere, not too far from here, there's an organized

band of probably hundreds of men, including ground and air men, who are thumbing their noses at the Mexican government, the oil companies, and law and order in general."

He stopped speaking and there was a moment of silence. Ransome and Harris were still unobtrusively appraising Farrell. White's eyes were on his pudgy hands and Blackie Williams was gazing at the ceiling, his lanky body sprawled approximately on the back of his neck.

"After this man you knew—I forget his name—decided to sell out and leave here," White resumed, "all the companies pooled resources and started an airdrome with a field outside of Tampico, for the purpose of flying executives up to the border and around the fields whenever haste was imperative. We laid in five good ships, Barton Eagles, and hired three experienced pilots and six mechanics, all of them, as far as we know, absolutely trustworthy. We tried hard enough to get something on them and they must be considered above suspicion as far as being in collusion with aërial outlaws is concerned.

"Everything went beautifully for a while, with the exception of an occasional forced landing, until the last five months. Then things broke loose. Now, airplanes come swooping down out

of the sky at the slightest provocation and raise merry Ned in all kinds of ways. They don't confine themselves merely to holding up ships with pay rolls in them. They all have machine guns and sometimes one of them will come over an isolated camp, threaten it with its guns and keep everybody helpless while a bunch of ground men, including both Mexicans and Americans, come in and take what they like. They seem to know when there is a considerable amount of money in any camp safe and to have a secret service system that absolutely covers the field."

Russ was leaning forward tensely, drinking in every word as it fell from the huge oil man's lips.

"You've no idea who the leader is?" he interrupted.

"Not exactly," Harris put in suddenly, his voice deep and harsh. "Whoever he is, he is the dog-gonedest character since Robin Hood and we think we know who it is. There's only one reason why we don't say we know exactly."

"What's that?" Russ demanded.

Blackie Williams shifted in his chair. A colored servant passed the door of the room, looking in inquiringly, only to be waved away by the ponderous White.

For the first time since his introduction to Russ,

Ransome spoke. He took off his spectacles and his words were as precise as his clothing.

"The man we suspect," he said in clipped phrases, "fits into the part of the Hawk—which is what this bandit calls himself—exactly in every particular but one. That one exception is that our suspect, as far as we can find out, has never been off the ground in his life."

"Which," drawled Blackie Williams, "seems to be a very important difference between the two."

Russ looked around the circle slowly. Before his mind there was the picture of a group of daring outlaws under the leadership of some superman, hidden far away in the depths of the jungle and laughing at the tremendous forces aligned against them. Though in no way did he approve of what they were doing, their reckless daring and ability was like a zestful challenge thrown in his face, and the entire situation called to every bit of the adventurer in him. He forced himself to speak slowly and calmly as he said:

"Then the actual fact is that you have no idea who composes the gang or, more important than that, who the leader is. Are you sure the leader actually flies? Maybe his men do all the flying."

"Apparently they don't," White told him incisively.

"No, it's a cinch they don't," Blackie Williams agreed with negligent ease. "They do some of it, Russ, as Mr. White here says, but on every big job, such as knocking off the fifty-thousand-dollar pay roll that was being carried in two ships, it seems a certainty that the boss himself was on the job—and a great egg he is, too, whoever he is."

"Why do you say that?" Russ demanded.

"Well, in the first place," Blackie drawled, "he's a big, tall fellow, powerfully built, and he always wears a pair of goggles that have dark glasses—they are sort of set into the combination leather helmet and mask that covers his entire face, except for a hole for his nose and a little slit for his mouth. His other men wear that too. But this egg goes about his business as though he was having the best time in the world. He laughs and chuckles to himself while he is getting the dough, kids the men that he takes it from and, in general, seems to be having the time of his life.

"And he's a flying fool, besides. He gets his ship down in places that you and I wouldn't think of, goes hedge-hopping and zooming and what-not all over the place. Seems to be one of those birds that can do everything better than anyone

else can. A half dozen times, it looked as though it was going to be a cinch to catch him, but he always gets away as easy as pie and then laughs at the world."

"Calls himself the Hawk," the lantern-jawed Harris put in harshly. "Grandstander!"

"He didn't start to do that," White reminded them, "until the Mexicans and rough-necks hung the title onto him."

"And ever since," Blackie said, "he's been dropping little notes here and there, giving directions and signing them 'The Hawk!' Just a nice little play boy, Russ, raising Cain all through the oil fields—and how the peons love him!"

"That's the worst of it," Ransome put in in his meticulous way. His square face registered no emotion whatever and his voice was as expressionless as though he were reading words he did not understand.

"There's something about a character like that that appeals to a lot of people who forget entirely that, at the bottom, he's nothing but a thug and a thief and a potential murderer. His exploits have been such that not only do the ignorant peons about the fields, who delight in seeing the rich gringos victimized, look on him as a hero, but it is the solid truth that about seventy-five per cent.

of our own American employees chuckle delightedly over his adventures and, I believe, really admire him."

"In other words," White said forcefully, "one might say that public sentiment is against us and on the side of a bandit whom a large number of people would hate to see caught——"

"Listen!" Russ interrupted, as though unable to bottle up his words. "Doesn't that account for all the information he gets? About your movements, I mean. If that's the way they feel, he could have hundreds of these peons willing to help him out!"

"Of course," White said. "In addition to other people, and some of them in high places, who give him very definite information. How many hundreds of people throughout the fields have secretly helped him with food and supplies of various kinds, and perhaps shelter, no one knows."

"He's this kind of a guy," Blackie drawled, grinning quizzically. "Six brand new airplane motors, a dozen propellers, and a lot of other supplies are shipped in here and put out on the dock. We leave them there over night. The next day, so help me, about four tons of material have dis-

appeared right here from the wharves of Tampico and there's a nice little note from the Hawk, thanking us for it—and he and the stuff have disappeared in thin air. What are you going to do with a guy like that?"

Russ took a deep breath and his blue eyes were shining like stars. Suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed as he had not laughed in weeks.

"Excuse me!" he chortled apologetically. "But this guy is certainly good."

White's heavy-jowled face widened in a rueful grin and even Harris' granite countenance lightened for a moment. Ransome, however, never changed expression.

"Who's the man you say you'd suspect if he could fly?" Russ asked finally.

"A driller named Arch Avery," White replied. "He answers the physical description of the Hawk exactly and has been an adventurer all over the world. College man, about thirty-eight years old, who has dabbled in oil from Persia to Venezuela—finally landed here broke, and became a driller.

"Awhile back, he drilled a wildcat on his own, about seventy-five miles out here in the monte, and brought her in. He tied up a lot of acreage

and got his money to drill the well from about twenty-five pals of his."

"Yes," nodded White. "There were twenty-five men, more or less of Avery's stamp, interested in the wildcat with him. He brought in a good well. Of course, he didn't have any pipe lines or pumping station—only one storage tank and the big sumps that he built. He wanted to get rid of his oil. His price was all right but no big company wanted to fool with it unless they could have the whole tract and really develop it—see?"

Russ nodded.

"But the price he wanted for his acreage," White went on, "was entirely out of reason. No big company would touch it. Consequently, there was nothing they could do. Avery wanted to develop the tract himself and have the big oil companies build pipe lines to handle his oil. None of the big companies wanted to go to the vast expense of doing all that and trust to Avery to develop the tract to its utmost potentialities—they took just the usual stand on that. Consequently, we couldn't do business. We just sat around and waited for him to come to our terms. He got sore—he's a hot-headed fellow—and wouldn't sell for a fair price. Plugged up his

well—he still owns the acreage—after all the sumps he could build were full of oil. Then disappeared. This was three or four months ago and coincides almost exactly with the start of operations of this so-called Hawk."

"You get it, don't you, Russ?" came Blackie's softly slurred voice. "There's a hundred thousand barrels of oil lying up there in the monte that he never got a nickel out of, a lot of good acreage that is lying there, unused, and Avery has disappeared——"

"Meaning," Russ said, his eyes probing White's steadily, "that he didn't think he was getting all the money that he and his partners deserved out of the territory they had proved up and the well they had brought in and, rather than take less, he preferred to see to it that you people didn't get any benefit out of it at all."

"Just a dog in the manger," Ransome said, unemotionally.

Farrell's eyes stole toward Blackie. Blackie had been squeezed in a similar way a year before and, as the Texan's eyes met his, there was the suspicion of a wink.

"You're sure your price was fair?" Russ demanded impulsively.

"Absolutely," Harris said, banging his fist on

the table as though that were a tender point with him. "Avery wanted to be whole hog or none—that's what it amounts to. We're competitors down here, Mr. Farrell. The three men you see sitting here represent three different competitive interests. Not a company in the field would meet his terms, because they were ridiculous."

"Of course," Blackie put in smoothly, "there's such a thing as an agreement and Avery had not been so popular."

"For very good reasons," Ransome declared levelly. "His methods of getting machinery that he needed in a hurry and other items weren't exactly open and above board."

"They were open enough," White said flatly, "but distinctly illegal. He took what he wanted, whether we wanted to give it to him or not. Why, he took three hundred feet of pipe from our Blazer No. 1 when we refused to give it to him."

"Of course," Blackie said calmly, studying a smoke ring with apparent enjoyment, "you weren't using the pipe at that time and perhaps he couldn't understand why, when he needed it so desperately, you wouldn't lend or sell it to him."

"Enough of that!" White said suddenly and his eyes were very cold and hard as he spoke. Sud-

denly it seemed that his ponderous body was vitalized and that dynamic forces within him had been unleashed.

"He isn't the general manager of the largest oil company in Mexico for nothing," Russ reflected.

"I've got about twenty minutes more," White said, "and we might as well get down to facts. Regardless of anything else, the situation sums down to this—an unknown outlaw, heading a band of men, with two or three flyers and a ground force of unknown size, is systematically robbing the oil companies of Mexico. This band of illegal workers, criminals, are making a laughing stock of the law—and they're doing worse than that. The Mexican government has tried, and is trying, with every means in its power, to enforce the law and it's as helpless as we are ourselves, for this confounded daredevil Hawk is too smart for all of us. Well, things are getting embarrassing from a diplomatic point of view. The head offices in New York, London, Holland, and elsewhere, representing the vast capital behind these companies, can't understand why they should be brazenly robbed of many thousands of dollars when their investments are supposedly under the protection of a recognized government.

"I tell you, gentleman, that the extermination of this bandit gang may be far more important than any mere matter of giving us financial security. The situation, as it is, is international dynamite that may be exploded with unpleasant effects at any moment. If we can't catch the Hawk, it may not be long before certain captains of industry request certain government officials to write somewhat strong notes, inquiring why the lives and property of their countrymen cannot be protected. Do you understand what I mean, Lieutenant Farrell?"

Russ nodded, wordless. His freckled face was very serious and, temporarily, he had forgotten the appeal the unknown bandit held for him and had snapped back into the mental attitude that had been his since the first day he had sworn to serve his country as one of its officers.

"I may say, Lieutenant Farrell," Ransome said quietly, "that this angle of the situation might possibly be the reason for your so easily obtaining a six months' leave of absence—not that you're considered to be on duty in any sense of the word, but possibly your chiefs would not object to your helping in the situation down here if you care to do so."

For a moment, there was silence. The three oil

men were watching the stalwart flyer. Finally Russ said:

"How did you come to pick on me and what do you want me to do?"

"I picked on you," Blackie said easily, "because when I was flying against you, so to speak, I found out that you were the best, luckiest, and craziest flyer I ever saw at the stick of a ship. I'd rather fight the Richthofen Circus in the air than I would you, because you don't give a nickel what happens to you and carry four-leaf clovers all over your ship."

Russ grinned briefly at the saturnine Williams. Then he turned to the oil men.

"Just what d' you want me to do, then?" he reminded them.

White glanced at his watch. "I have only ten minutes left but that will be long enough," he wheezed. "Now listen!

"We have confidence in Blackie as a man and as a flyer. We have reached the conclusion that, with the approval of the government, we must take this matter into our own hands. Consequently, we have bought, and now have set up on the field just outside of town here, three Curtiss Bullets, which, we understand, are the best two-seated fighting planes the market affords. They

are armed with Lewis machine guns in the back seat and synchronized Brownings, shooting through the propeller, in the front. That we have bought the ships and are making you and another man a proposition, we have endeavored—we think successfully—to keep a secret. We desire you, Blackie, and Duke Delroy, to man these ships, sometimes singly and sometimes in pairs, as the situation may dictate, for the purpose of rounding up, capturing, or otherwise exterminating the Hawk and his gang, by methods which you yourselves will figure out from your idea of aërial tactics."

White was now speaking with a direct, forceful clearness that made his words seem like the product of a mentality that worked like well-oiled machinery.

"It has been decided by Blackie and us that there shall always be at least one ship at an oil camp next to a primitive little Mexican town in the monte named Rebrache. When you look at a map of the fields, you will see that that is a strategic point from which you can reach quickly a large portion of the sector in which the Hawk works."

He leaned back in his chair and mopped his

perspiring bald head as he smiled—that curiously baby-like smile.

"I feel as though I were back in the days when I read Nick Carter," he said in his throaty voice. " 'Sector in which the Hawk, the notorious outlaw, works'—doesn't that sound as though it came from a book?"

"Believe me, this bird is one for a book," Blackie drawled.

"We make you this offer, Lieutenant Farrell," White went on and, in a second, he had been transformed once more into the aggressive director of big affairs. "We'll give you a lump sum, an amount to be agreed upon, satisfactory, for your services as an aërial detective, let's say. You get this sum whether it takes you and the other flyers two weeks or six months to do the job, and should it happen that at the end of six months you boys haven't been able to do it, you get the lump sum just the same. We have confidence in your loyalty and sincerity. I may say that your acceptance of the offer will not be frowned on officially in the States as you doubtless know. Now, does the offer interest you?"

"Does it? I'll say!"

It was like an exultant explosion from the red-

headed pilot, and involuntarily the composed oil men smiled in unison. It seemed as though something electric in Russ momentarily communicated his enthusiasm to his companions.

"How about—" White hesitated and then named a sum that made Russ's eyes open wide. "Furthermore," White went on, "we'll give you half of it in advance. You may find opportunities for advantageous investments around the oil fields and some cash on hand may be the means of making you a comfortable little sum. Army officers aren't overpaid, I believe. Williams represents the combined oil companies and knows this country. In general, your tactics will be worked out by yourselves."

As White finished Russ turned his head quickly. A snatch of song had reached his ears from behind the closed door that led to the stairway. The words reached his ears clearly in a rich, crooning baritone, and something about the combination of song and voice struck him. It grew louder as the unseen singer climbed the stairs.

"Duke Delroy approacheth," Williams remarked casually, "singing his favorite hymn."

For some reason Russ found himself awaiting the advent of his unknown comrade-to-be

with tense expectancy. His foot tapped nervously in time to the eerie rhythm of the negro spiritual that Delroy was crooning:

"Some o' dese nights 'bout twelve o'clock
Dis ol' world's gwine to reel 'n rock.
Pharaoh's army got drownded.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep—don' you moan—
Oh, Mary, don' you weep—don' you moan—
Pharaoh's army got drownded."

No one spoke. It seemed as though all were waiting Delroy's appearance, as though nothing could be said until he arrived.

"That guy would sing at his funeral," Blackie mumbled, as though to himself.

The unseen flyer was close to the top of the stairs now, as he swung into another verse.

"Ah don' know but Ah been tol'
De streets o' Heaben ah paved with gol'
Pharaoh's army got drownded."

The outside door, which Russ could see through the open door of the room in which they were sitting, was flung open as the song stopped and a tall figure paused momentarily in the doorway. Delroy glanced around the reading room, as though in search of someone.

"Over here, Duke," Williams called to him and Delroy waved casually as he started across

the foyer. Russ's eyes never left him for a second. He was to find out later that such centering of attention was a not uncommon phenomenon when strangers first met Mr. Lawrence Delroy, otherwise known as "the Duke."

He was taller than the average, very slender, dressed in riding breeches and boots and a white shirt open at the neck. The slenderness of his body was accentuated by his attire. He moved with an easy grace that indicated steel muscles under marvelous control. It was his face, however, that held Russ. It was topped by a shock of golden blond hair that seemed fairly to radiate light. It was crisp and wavy, as though there were something electric in it and, below it, a youthfully handsome face was tanned to a golden bronze. Delroy was gray-eyed and square-jawed and his mouth was wide below a straight, thin-nostriled nose.

As he caught sight of Blackie, he grinned a greeting and his face lit up until it was positively radiant. In every line of it there seemed to be an unquenchable zest for living and even in his gestures, as he greeted the oil men, there was a sort of sublime devil-may-careness which indicated that Duke Delroy found life good and had no worries. His gray eyes sparkled as they

rested on Russ, and when he shook hands that flashing smile played over the army flyer like a searchlight.

"Glad to know you, Russ," he said breezily. "Welcome to our city. The three musketeers are now complete, whether you like it or not. And maybe we'll have fun—what?"

Russ's answering grin came as though a button had been pressed and he could not help himself. He was aware that he had met a magnetic personality, and he sensed the fact that following the trail of Duke Delroy would be a very interesting journey.

"Everything all set?" Delroy inquired smilingly. "Lord, it's hot! How about it, Mr. White? This Delroy lad is rarin' to go."

He sat on the edge of the table and swung one slim foot back and forth slowly.

"Speak," he encouraged the oil man. "You're among friends."

Suddenly, as the newcomer turned his head away, his profile leaped out at Russ. Some of the youthfulness disappeared when Delroy's face was seen from the side. The nose was bolder, the cheek bones seemed higher, and the line of his jaw was clean and strong. When he looked around again and smiled, it seemed to wipe five years

from his age and to turn him into a good-looking college boy. That is, it did until one noticed the level competence in those clear gray eyes. Blackie seemed mature alongside him and the saturnine cast to his dark face to be more pronounced in contrast to the youthful abandon and joy in living that was in Delroy's.

"Mr. Delroy, otherwise known as 'the Duke,' " White said dryly, "is to assist you and Blackie, Lieutenant Farrell. He was in the French Air Service during the war."

"Among others," Delroy said airily. "Don't let them kid you, Russ. I wasn't in it long. Our friends, the enemies, got too smart for me."

"After you had out-smarted them by knocking seven of them down," Blackie interrupted.

"My life history," remarked Delroy, "is a matter of little moment at this time. There are three Bullets ready to go to the field and panting to be tested. Is Russ hired?"

"He is," Russ grinned.

"At a good salary, I hope," Delroy laughed. "By the way, Mr. White, being only a half-time guy myself——"

"What do you mean 'half-time' ?" Russ asked him.

"Oh, I'm drilling myself a little well away

back up in the monte," Delroy told him lightly. "What I mean is that I'm amusing myself digging a two-thousand-foot hole in the ground for no reason. I don't believe there's any more oil up there than there is in this table, but we boys must have our fun; so Delroy No. 1 is being drilled seventy miles from the nearest improved territory, thereby establishing beyond question what everyone has always suspected—that my life wouldn't be safe in a squirrel cage."

"I hope you get something but I don't believe there's a chance," Harris said, as he got to his feet. He pulled at his small iron-gray mustache thoughtfully. "I wish you were going to be on the job all the time, Duke."

"Business is business and flying is fun," Delroy grinned. "But the Delroy lad will be ready to leap into his ship at the slightest provocation four days out of a week, on an average. The rest of the time I must spend with my baby, Delroy No. 1. I have the field all cleared up there so that I can take the ship in and be on call any second."

"By the way, is the portable radio up?" White asked him, and Delroy nodded.

"Going to use radio, eh?" Russ said in astonishment.

"The Hawk," Ransome said, in his meticulous

way, "has a habit of cutting telephone and telegraph wires."

"Calling Lieutenant Farrell," came a voice from outside.

"Here," Russ shouted quickly. "Gosh! Who knows I'm here?"

A white-coated club servant stood at the door with a note on a tray. Russ picked it up mechanically. It was a plain white envelope, addressed simply to "Lieutenant Russell Farrell, Colonial Club."

"Where did you get this?" he asked the negro absently.

"Mexican boy just brung it, suh."

Russ ripped it open and for a second he could scarcely realize the import of what he was reading. His eyes widened in utter astonishment and he felt as though he were in a dream.

"Some old friend of yours smoking you out?" Blackie inquired and the words seemed to cut through Farrell's mental fog. Before he could speak, Harris' voice, a curious vibrancy in it, broke the silence. The lean oil man had glanced over Russ's shoulder.

"That's the bird, signature and all!" he burst forth.

"What do you mean?" snapped White.

"Listen!" Russ said slowly and read the few typewritten words:

"DEAR LIEUTENANT FERRELL:

"It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you to Tampico but may I suggest that your stay will be more pleasant if you look upon it strictly as a vacation?

"And it's signed 'The Hawk,'" Russ said steadily. "Is that his signature all right?"

Blackie Williams was on his feet as though shot from springs. His dark eyes glanced briefly at the bold signature and, suddenly, they were flashing as they swept the group.

"That's his," he said slowly. "That came straight from the Hawk. So help me!"

Delroy's rollicking laugh rang through the room.

"'At-a-boy, Hawkie!" the blond pilot chuckled. "The battle's on! How do you feel, Russ?"

For a second, Russ didn't know himself. Then, as he looked at Delroy and Blackie, his mind seemed to clear and in a split second a thousand thoughts had flashed through his brain. Suddenly his freckled face was aglow and his grin was as wide and his eyes as bright as Delroy's. His heart was pounding as he half shouted:

"Great!"

CHAPTER III

TWO hours later, Russ was sitting in the cockpit of one of the Curtiss Bullets, warming the twelve-cylinder motor. Blackie was in the rear cockpit behind him, and alongside the ship was its twin, being warmed up by Duke Delroy. The sun was beating down pitilessly on the flat flying field, and had turned the three corrugated iron hangars into huge ovens. Russ was accustomed to Texas heat but it seemed as though he had never been so warm in his life before, although he was dressed only in coveralls and underwear.

A mechanic stood beside each ship, ready to pull the wheel blocks and, over in the shade of one of the hangars, two of the regular pilots of the Oil Field Flyers, Inc., were waiting to observe the first test flights of the new ships.

Russ, despite his physical discomfort, was exuberantly happy as his eyes swept from oil gauge to tachometer, to voltmeter. The rest he had had on shipboard seemed to have revived all the mad

delight in flying that strenuous duty had temporarily dimmed in him. The duties that lay ahead of him were in themselves a marvelous prospect to the young flyer, but the last element necessary to make his happiness complete was the trim craft he was to fly.

To him it was a beautiful sight as it glistened there in the sun, and periodically his eyes left his instruments to glance over it, as though caressing every strut and wire.

Streamline to the last degree, constructed almost entirely of duralumin, with all-metal propeller, and with compartments for clothes and emergency rations, capable of one hundred and seventy miles an hour when flown wide open, with a landing speed of only sixty miles an hour, and with brakes for the wheels and an adjustable stabilizer to assist in making landing safer—it seemed to him practically perfect. Could he have built a dream ship for the perilous duty ahead, it did not seem to him that he would have changed a detail.

He forgot the vaguely annoying thoughts that had bothered him for the last two hours, and as he signaled to his mechanic to pull the wheel blocks he was like a bird, eager to reach his native element far above the earth.

The wind was coming from the west and the ship was headed that way. Slowly he eased the throttle forward until it was wide open. The Bullet seemed to leap into full career with the speed of its namesake, and within seventy yards Russ felt it leave the ground in a rush of seemingly resistless power. He gave the instruments a last brief glance. Oil pressure, 25; voltmeter charging 2, R. P. M. 1950; temperature 85 Centigrade—all was well.

He tried to climb gradually for safety's sake but it seemed as though the ship were eager to leave the earth below as quickly as possible. Russ could scarcely believe it when he looked down at the edge of the field and saw that he was fully a thousand feet high.

As he circled he throttled the motor to 1550 revolutions and glanced back at Blackie with eyes that shone behind his goggles. Blackie nodded and, for a moment, his answering smile was as full of enthusiasm as his young companion's.

"What a ship!" Russ breathed as he sent it circling higher. "I feel as though I could lick a thousand Hawks in this!"

Eastward, three miles from the field, lay Tampico, gleaming in the sun. It was a far cry

from the squalid, ramshackle huts that fringed the banks of the river to the shining white castles on the outskirts of town. Spread before him was Mexico epitomized—highly developed civilization, side by side with squalor and ignorance so primitive that it was scarcely a degree above savagery.

Branching off from the Panuco River, which wound like a great snake through the monte until it disappeared from view, was the Tamesi, a gleaming rift between banks that were covered with foliage of tropical luxuriousness. As far as eye could see, on three sides, was the brooding monte, and eastward was the sea.

Russ, looking at the scene with his flyer's eyes, almost forgot to watch the performance of his ship. Automatically he shifted his body on his seat-pack parachute to attain more comfort but his eyes and thoughts never left the jungle. There would be hours and hours of flying over that tangled mass of tropical undergrowth and it seemed to him, for the moment, that it was a far more dangerous menace than the aërial bandit who would be lying in wait for him somewhere in that wilderness.

He sent his ship roaring out over it as though to become better acquainted with the impersonal

enemy with whom he and his motor would fight a never ending battle. Narrow dirt roads ran here and there through it, leading to the oil camps that were buried in its depths, and occasionally a small length of buried pipe line was exposed to view.

The great terminals along the river were left behind as Russ, in the grip of the jungle's fascination, flew steadily southward. His mind was busy speculating on all that lay hidden in those tangled depths. Bandit gangs drove through its seemingly impassable fastness and, in small groups, indomitable oil men were fighting their battle against it. There would be pipeline gangs cutting their way through it and, here and there, he could see a single automobile crawling along a road that was scarcely more than a trail. Civilization might be slowly conquering it but the conquest was far from complete.

Reflections such as these turned his mind back to the vaguely foreboding thoughts that had somehow become stronger since that astounding letter from the Hawk.

"No one is above suspicion," White nad said.

Suddenly Russ's every muscle grew tense and his head snapped back like a scared animal's.

Without any warning, the rhythmic roar of

the 400-horse-power motor died. His hand darted to the throttle and worked it back and forth frantically. His eyes swept the gauges but they told him nothing.

"It must be ignition trouble or the motor wouldn't go dead that way!"

He looked down and, as he saw the panorama below him, he cursed himself savagely.

"What a fool I am!" he raved bitterly. "Test flight and I have to get where there isn't a landing field within miles!"

He circled to look behind but the prospect was equally hopeless. He saw Delroy's ship a half-mile behind him and somewhat higher.

"The Duke has followed us," he thought absently.

He strove to think of a way out. Below, there was no clearing that was a possibility for landing. Should he land in the river and attempt to salvage the motor, at least, or jump to save his own life and let the ship crash? In any event, Blackie must jump.

He turned around to meet the level eyes of Williams. The dark-faced Texan's lips quirked in his customary quizzical smile. He was as cool as a May morning as he leaned forward and shouted:

"Jump for it. I'll land her and try to save something."

"Jump yourself!" Russ shouted back. "I'll try the river!"

Williams leaned forward and his dark eyes burned into his young companion's.

"Don't be a fool!" he snapped. "You're an American Army officer and all the rest of it. Jump, I tell you! If I decide I can't make it, I'll jump too, but if anybody tries to save her, it's going to be me."

The ship was gliding down slowly and the roar of Delroy's motor was all that broke the silence except for the low whine of the wires. The prop was turning lazily in the air stream and the ship was floating down so peacefully that it seemed unthinkable that certain tragedy was but a few minutes away.

"I'm the pilot," Russ shouted.

"Who told you you were the pilot?" Williams snapped back, and suddenly his face was grim and cruel. "And don't forget I'm your boss. Jump, I tell you!"

As Russ looked into those long, level eyes, he knew that Williams meant exactly what he said. There were tears of baffled fury in his eyes as he unstrapped his belt and put his foot on the side

of the cockpit. The air stream hit him like a blow but he steadied himself as he leaned over toward Williams and shouted:

"I was a fool, Blackie. Jump yourself, will you? I won't jump if you don't!"

Blackie's hand moved with the speed of a striking rattler. In a split second he had pulled the rip cord of the 'chute and Farrell found himself jerked into thin air. The next second, he was swinging downward like a huge pendulum.

As he watched Blackie glide down he forgot that the landing ahead, even for him, was a perilous one. He found himself praying incoherently that the mocking ex-outlaw would not be hurt.

Duke Delroy was circling around him now, waving to him for all the world as though it were a lark. Blackie was above him, gliding slowly toward the river.

Suddenly it seemed to Russ that he was dropping faster than usual. Ordinarily, the fact that one was dropping at all was almost indiscernible at that height, which was close to four thousand feet. His face and nose felt as though he were going too fast. He glanced upward at the big white silk umbrella. Then it seemed that his heart stopped beating.

Starting at the small air vent in the top of the 'chute were two small rips in the silk. For a second his anguished eyes watched them as they slowly lengthened in the force of the air stream. It was only a matter of moments before he would be dropping like a plummet below a torn and almost useless 'chute. There was not a thing he could do to save himself.

For a moment, a mad desire to loosen his harness and get it all over with quickly swept over him. Mercifully, he was half dazed with the awful suddenness of it all and seemed to be living through a fantastic nightmare.

Suddenly, a huge, black spot seemed to flash past his eyes. He looked forward stupidly. A ship was spinning toward the ground out of control and there was no passenger in it. Had Blackie jumped? Suddenly, three hundred feet below him, an expanse of white was outlined against the green of the jungle.

"Anyhow, that's another parachute," he thought dazedly. The sight of it seemed to snap him back into full possession of his faculties, and a miraculous mental clarity came to him. That black spot had been the jumper passing him before opening his 'chute—and it was Duke.

The blond pilot was swinging down below his 'chute, motioning madly to him.

In a second Russ comprehended what Delroy had done. He had seen the torn 'chute and jumped past him in a desperate endeavor to save him.

In an instant Russ was in action. Delroy was now but one hundred feet below him and perhaps fifteen feet to one side.

Russ grasped the shroud lines on the right-hand side. He was being carried by the breeze in that direction, away from Delroy. He pulled down that edge of the crippled 'chute, endeavoring to drop as straight as possible. It was hard to get his breath now and the 'chute was torn almost from rim to rim. Below him, Delroy was still swinging like a huge pendulum and Russ could see that he was voluntarily keeping himself in the swing. His outstretched arms could cover more territory that way. The lower 'chute was leaping up at him and a wave of utter despair surged over the red-headed pilot as he saw that he would pass Delroy twenty feet to the left.

He let go the shroud lines in a desperate endeavor to let the breeze carry him a bit more toward Duke. At the same second, Delroy pulled down the left side of his 'chute to try to keep from

being carried any more to the right. He was swinging desperately.

In a second Russ would be even with him. He was. And Delroy had missed by three feet.

Russ was very close to him and momentarily his tortured eyes met the blazing ones of Delroy in mute farewell.

"O. K., big boy! I'll get you yet!"

It was like a wild war cry from Delroy's throat.

Russ, his head back, watched him. As Delroy gathered up his 'chute and dropped like a plummet, Russ gauged the drop with his eyes and suddenly hope arose again in his heart. Again he slipped his 'chute to maneuver himself close to Delroy's line of flight.

Fifteen feet below him and not five feet to one side, Delroy's 'chute flipped open again and, a second later, Russ's right hand had a death grip on three of the shroud lines.

For a wild instant they were a tangled mass in the air, and then he found himself, weak with relief, in Delroy's arms.

"This's so much more chummy than jumping alone," the blond young flyer laughed. "How have you been?"

The laughing words were like a tonic to the

half conscious Farrell and he found himself laughing into Delroy's face. He was shaky from the reaction but he was able to say:

"Pretty well. Here's the ground!"

It was but three hundred feet below. Russ's crippled 'chute helped to offset the double weight on Delroy's 'chute, and they did not hit the ground too hard.

Russ staggered to his feet weakly.

"Thanks, Duke," he said simply.

"Don't mention it," Delroy rejoined airily. "Lucky we didn't hit a tree. What happened up there before you jumped?"

Russ leaned weakly against a palm tree at the edge of the tiny ten-foot clearing.

"Motor went dead," he began. "Blackie——"

Suddenly the drone of a motor reached his ears and he gazed upward unbelievingly. It was Blackie, and the motor of the Bullet was hitting perfectly.

"Seems to be all right now," came Delroy's voice. "You were a little bit previous, I guess."

"Seems so," Russ said mechanically.

He was silent for a moment and Delroy, for some reason, was silent too, as Blackie swooped low over the clearing and waved to them. He circled again and a note fell into the monte, a

short distance away. Delroy retrieved it and brought it back to Russ, who was sitting on the ground in a brown study. He had almost forgotten the fact that he had just escaped death by an eyelash, and he scarcely listened as Delroy said:

"There's a trail down near the river and he'll send a car out for us. Guess we've got to wait but we'll have transportation anyway. This jungle is no place for a walk. What's on your mind, Russ?"

"Nothing," Russ returned.

But there was. Of course, a motor could go dead and start again, but it was highly improbable. A parachute could split, he supposed, but he had never heard of a new parachute's doing it —and these parachutes were brand new. Russ's mind got that far, stalled a moment, raced on.

If Blackie Williams were really an ally of the Hawk and if he did not want Russ Farrell or anyone else hunting for the aërial bandits and wanted to get rid of him, what would he do? He might pretend, when he found that he could not prevent the employment of the flyer, that he had been partially responsible for it; and he might figure out a way to get rid of him without any suspicion of murder. And if that was

what he wanted, there was nothing to prevent his tampering with the 'chute, cutting off the gas from the rear cockpit to make the motor go dead, forcing his victim to jump.

It was no wonder that Russ was silent as he got to his feet.

CHAPTER IV

WITH conjectures like these swarming in his dazed brain, Russ was far from ready for action. Silent and distraught, he again leaned against a palm tree, his head bent in thoughts that made his boyish face grin.

Delroy lounged easily on the ground, careless of the myriads of insects crawling about him. He was watching Russ unobtrusively, his gray eyes very bright, and he was humming almost as though unconscious of what he was singing:

"Ah don' know but Ah been tol'
De streets o' Heaben ah paved with gol'
Pharaoh's army got drowned.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep—"

A loud rustle came from the thick undergrowth, some distance away, and Delroy's head turned toward it.

"Sounds like a wild hog," he said gayly. "We have the beast down in this country, and he's a mean hombre if he's cornered."

As though the casual words had snapped Russ out of his trance, the young flyer straightened himself.

"Let's take a look at my 'chute," he said abruptly.

"O. K.," Delroy returned. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing," Russ said absently.

Delroy walked with him to the edge of the thick clearing, where Russ's 'chute had blown against some bushes. They spread it out on the ground and Russ examined the split closely. The two breaks at the center of the 'chute, which had started the long slashes and made the 'chute a death trap, were clean and sharp. There was nothing jagged about them and Russ was thinking aloud as he said:

"I suppose the shock of opening, if it was going to break the 'chute at all, would break it clean."

"The silk seems O. K.," Delroy said slowly, and as his eyes rested on Russ they were as bright as two searchlights. As Russ's eyes met Delroy's, it seemed to him that an electric spark of understanding had passed between them.

"Let's pack the 'chute and start for that trail, big boy," Delroy said cheerily. "It won't be long

till the car from the field will come to pick us up."

They folded up the billowing masses of white silk, tied them with the shroud lines and started down a narrow cut that led toward the river. For a moment, they tramped along silently, except for Delroy's musical humming. Then that young gentleman said suddenly:

"Figure somebody tampered with your 'chute, eh?"

For a moment Russ hesitated, then:

"In a way," he admitted.

"What happened to your motor up there?" was Delroy's next question and, casually as it was thrown off, the inference in his words was unmistakable.

Again Russ hesitated. Finally he said with an effort:

"It went absolutely dead."

"How come you jumped?"

"I didn't want to—I wanted to try to land the ship—but Blackie made me."

It was as though every word were wrenched from Russ.

"And then," Delroy went on remorselessly, "the motor becomes absolutely perfect again. Funny about these motors, eh?"

Russ glanced at him and then shifted his gaze. He had an almost ungovernable impulse to confide in Delroy. It would not really be a confidence because it was obvious that Delroy's mind was working in the same channels as his own. Nevertheless, he could not somehow. As long as there was one iota of doubt in his own mind concerning Blackie, it seemed like black treachery even to whisper his suspicions.

For a moment, there was tense silence as the two flyers tramped doggedly down the cut through the jungle. Bright-plumaged birds of a dozen varieties darted from the underbrush as they passed and there were a thousand rustles and whispers from the depths of the monte. As though to relieve the tension, Delroy said lightly:

"If you gaze through yonder opening, you will see the well-known ebony tree, worth a lot of dinero. To our left is a cacao tree. Very easy to start a grove of those trees. If you cut off a limb, and stick it into the ground, it will grow. They make great fence posts."

Russ smiled mechanically. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead wearily. The steaming heat seemed to be sapping his vitality, and already his coveralls were soaked with perspiration.

"Listen, Red," Delroy said suddenly. "I think I know what's on your mind. Don't get me wrong now. I'm just talking possibilities—understand? Suppose there should be—er—someone around the airdrome who was in with the Hawk, or maybe might be the Hawk himself, and he didn't want any of your game. I could figure nothing more beautiful than to cut off the gas, say, and force you to jump in a framed 'chute. That would be the simplicity of genius, as it were."

Russ nodded mutely.

"Furthermore," Delroy pursued blithely, as though discussing a subject of no moment whatever, "the only place that 'chute could be tampered with is right at the airdrome, and that narrows down the possible tamperers to a very few people. Going further in my masterly analysis and presuming for the sake of argument that monkey business is afoot, I'd say that arranging for a quick jump narrows the suspects, much as I hate to admit it, down to just one. In fact, nobody else could be concerned."

He ceased speaking and Russ felt, rather than saw, those flashing gray eyes upon him. Again, it seemed impossible for him to speak. Finally, though, he forced himself to say:

"Of course, we may both be talking through our hats, motors do cut out and nothing is perfect. I just happened to get a 'chute that didn't quite come up to scratch and I did fall quite a way before I opened it."

"Listen Russ!" Delroy interrupted and stopped in his tracks. Russ stopped too and they were facing each other, their eyes very close together. "You and I might as well have an understanding," Delroy said steadily and his handsome face was serious for the moment. "There's no use of beating the devil around the stump. Blackie Williams is a great guy and I like him and I know you do. I haven't known him long but I've considered him a friend of mine."

"You haven't been around here long then?" Russ put in.

Delroy shook his head.

"Got here about two weeks before this Hawk started raising Ned," he answered and a brief grin flashed over his face. "I'm thanking my stars that the guy is a lot bigger than I am or I might be under suspicion myself, being a flyer. I came down here with a little money to take a gamble in these fields where the wells, if and when they come in, flow enough oil to float the Navy. I met

Blackie around at the hotel and through the fields and like him a whale of a lot but I know his past history."

"So do I," Russ said mechanically, "but, doggone it, Duke, I just can't believe it."

"You mean you hate to believe it," Delroy corrected him levelly. "But let's look at things. You just ran into Blackie when he was helping this old nut smuggle immigrants into the United States by air, didn't you?"

"Sure, but, after all, that's illegal rather than a real crime—you know what I mean. There are lots of people in the States who didn't agree with the law at all and I could see how a guy could figure that giving some poor foreigners a chance at real opportunity in a country like the United States might really be doing a good turn, even if it was illegal. Not that I'm excusing it, but it doesn't necessarily make a man—a——"

"Murderer, my boy, murderer," Delroy finished for him. "Then Blackie comes down here and gets a pretty raw deal from the big companies. All in line of business, so they say, but he starts in to get the money back by the same methods that the Hawk is using."

"But he gave it all back," Russ burst forth. "He was fighting against his own best judgment."

"Yes," Delroy agreed, "so I understand, but now a smart fellow like me,"—his grin changed his words from egotism to humorous self-mockery—"would figure that it would be much more desirable to be an ally of all the big companies on the surface and get my dope from them from the inside, as it were, than it would be to be a looming lone wolf working out in the open."

Russ did not answer him. There seemed an inescapable logic in Delroy's analysis that could not be answered. As though moved by a single impulse, the two flyers started tramping toward the river again. Russ felt that he had to have some physical outlet for the emotions that were seething within him.

"Now, listen, Russ," Delroy said finally, "get me straight. Understand that I'm not saying that Blackie Williams is the Hawk. He answers the physical description to a T, from black hair to his height and weight and general characteristics. His past record makes him the most logical person to suspect with one exception and that's Avery —and even Avery, as far as anybody knows, never flew in his life. They are trying to check up on that point now. If Avery ever did fly, it looks like a case of allies, but I'm not saying that Blackie is allied in any way with the Hawk necessarily.

I sure would hate to think so as much as you would. What I'm getting at is this: If there's one chance in a thousand that he is, it puts you and me in a very, very tough spot and we would be nothing but star-spangled idiots if we weren't looking out for our own necks where Blackie is concerned. In other words, we've got to act as though Blackie's a traitor to us and watch him accordingly. Isn't that common sense?"

Russ nodded. Then he exploded:

"Anybody above the grade of a half-wit would see everything you say, Duke, and I'll swear I just can't believe one thing, and that is that Blackie Williams would voluntarily set out to murder me."

Delroy shrugged his shoulders. "I can't believe it myself," he said. "Let's not breathe one whisper to a living soul about what we think may be true but just keep on the watch, eh? I'll swear that if it were any other man than Blackie Williams I'd be getting Ransome or White or Harris on the 'phone as soon as we got to the field; and I'll see to it that on some excuse or other, Blackie was put where he could do no harm."

Another silence fell and it seemed to be fraught with depressing mystery for both men. It is always tragic to catch a glimpse of something ugly

and menacing in what has seemed a source of contentment and satisfaction. The red-headed young Army pilot seemed to lose much of his boyishness as he tramped doggedly through the monte.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," he said steadily. "We can't let Blackie know a thing. If we're wrong, and I know dog-gone well we are somehow, it would break his heart to find out we could suspect him. We'll just lie low and keep watch. One definite thing we can do, perhaps, is to find out just how easy it would have been for him to make these mysterious flying trips and still be an employee of the big companies."

"Don't forget that he has at least two allies—we know that because sometimes three ships work together," Farrell reminded him. Suddenly he grinned. "Listen, Russ!" he said impulsively. "Don't think I'm trying to knock Blackie. I'm telling you I think as much of him as you do; but I think a lot of one Duke Delroy's personal neck and I've just got to say these things for the protection of us both. I'm glad I've got you along with me, too, big boy, and that goes as it lies."

Russ turned his head and, as their eyes met, he impulsively thrust out his hand. "That goes double," he said quietly. "I guess we'll get along."

Then, because the whole subject was so un-

pleasant that they wanted to take their minds from it, they talked, during the next hour, mostly of themselves. Delroy, it proved, had enlisted in the French air service at the age of sixteen, pretending that he was nineteen, and had fought through the entire war, transferring from the French to the American service when the United States entered hostilities. After that, he had drifted to Persia, where he had worked in the oil fields, and then had come back to the Texas oil fields. There he had made a little money but not enough to satisfy him. He had come to Mexico a short time before to try to turn his little stake into a big one.

His recital was shot through with a hundred side anecdotes and comments that revealed him to Russ as the bare record of where he had been and what he had done could not have done. Russ came to see in the vital young pilot beside him a blithe adventurer, laughing at life, who might have been his own twin except for one characteristic. That one thing was engrained in Russ but seemed wholly lacking in Delroy; it was a certain steady sense of responsibility combined with a desire to contribute, in some way, to something worth while in living. To Delroy, apparently, life was a merry pilgrimage to be made

as easily as possible, and he meant to find plenty of fun along the way.

"Ambition is the curse of most young men," he said airily, at one point in the conversation. "I like to have fun. I don't mean city fun—tea parties with girls and so on. My fun comes through beating the more remote parts of the world out of a living and getting as many kicks as possible out of doing it. You take this little junket we're on now for instance—a lot of fun, eh?"

"Sure," grinned Russ, "as a sort of vacation. No, it's more than that, of course, but I like to feel somehow that I'm getting somewhere—you know—doing something."

"From what I hear," Delroy told him carelessly, "you are getting somewhere all right. If you don't break your fool neck, you'll probably be Chief of Air Service some day at the rate you're going. Well, we're winning out upon the well-known river. Some time when we get some time off we'll go tarpon fishing. There's a bridge just outside of Tampico, across the river, where you can get the best tarpon fishing in the world. Aha! Yonder chariot looks as though it might be ours."

It was. The car belonged to Paddock, chief pilot at the field, and was driven by a mechanic.

As soon as they were on their way back, Russ leaned forward and asked, "They didn't have a chance to look over the motor of my ship before you left, did they?"

"Just a little," the mechanic replied over his shoulder. "She was hitting perfectly. Something must have plugged up the jets and maybe Mr. Williams' dive cleaned them out again. Tough break, eh?"

"Sure was!" Russ grinned. He sank back in his seat. He wanted to believe that explanation but, as far as he could remember, Blackie had not dived the ship steeply at all. In fact, his glide had been very gradual. Sometimes jets did plug and a really terrific dive would create suction enough to remove the obstructions out of the needle-like holes that sprayed the gas into the carburetor. But in this case . . .

It was an hour's trip over rugged roads to the field, and when they arrived, Russ's first question was for Williams.

"He went to town," the stocky chief pilot told him. "Said he'd be back. The third ship will be ready to test in an hour or so. Are you boys going to pull out for Rebrache this afternoon?"

"I don't know," Delroy told him. "By the way, Russ, we're going to be sort of up against it until

we get another ship. I've just got to be at my well part of the time, and if I use one of the ships, that leaves only one for you and Blackie at Rebrache some of the time."

"We'll settle that later," Russ told him. "Maybe Blackie and I can hang around there."

"One ship isn't so many against three," Delroy reminded him. "Well, let's get these flying clothes off and get into town. I could use a bath, if you will give me the use of your bathroom, and I suppose we had better report to Ransome."

"Didn't find out anything about the motor, did you, Paddock?" Russ asked.

The weather-beaten chief pilot shook his head.

"Nary a thing," he answered in his Mississippi drawl. "Must 'a' been plugged jets, I guess. Pretty lucky, savin' the ship."

"That's so," Russ assented absently. "I'll be hanged if I can understand about that 'chute though. As far as I know, it's the first time in history that an Irving has gone wrong—unless somebody made it wrong."

For a long five seconds Paddock's eyes rested on Russ. The words had dropped from the young pilot's lips automatically and, a second later, he could have bitten off his tongue for having said

them. Then he realized that the men at the field must be in their confidence if they were to work efficiently.

"Listen, Paddock!" he said. "Are you positive of every man you have here?"

"Absolutely, suh," Paddock said slowly. "Let's look at that 'chute."

"No need to," Delroy told him lightly. "We've both looked. The two cuts in the inside boundary of the 'chute—you know, in the opening of the pilot 'chute—are as clean as a whistle. They could have been made by a knife or just by the shock of opening."

Paddock's narrow, sun-crinkled eyes played over the two men briefly. His bulldog jaw was outthrust and his stubby pompadour seemed to bristle belligerently as he said with deliberation:

"We'll test that silk and if she's up to snuff, it was a knife."

"Well, if it was a knife," Russ told him, "it was used right on this field. Must have been, eh?"

Paddock's face was bleak and wintry as he nodded.

"I'd stake my soul on every one of my boys," he told them.

That there was a hidden meaning in his em-

phasis of the word "my" was as obvious as though he had gone on to explain himself.

"Sounds as though there was somebody around that perhaps——"

Russ didn't finish the sentence but he didn't need to finish it.

"I'm not sayin' anything," the veteran airman said doggedly, "because I don't know any more about anybody, or maybe as much, as you do."

"Don't hold out on us," Delroy told him. "We've got to work together on this thing. Just what have you got in mind?"

"Nothing important," Paddock told them. "But I'll promise you one thing. There won't be any more inside jobs around this field—even if one may have been pulled off in the past."

He walked with them toward the hangar and briefly outlined his plans. There would be two men on guard, night and day, no man to know when his tour of duty came until the last minute or with whom it was to be.

"One guard to watch the other, even if I do trust them all," he explained. "It's going to be bad enough to watch the sky without having to watch what you're riding in, besides."

Russ knew as positively as though Paddock had openly spoken his thoughts what the square-

faced pilot had implied a few minutes before. It was inescapable. Blackie's record along——

Russ opened the door of his locker to put away his coveralls, helmet, and goggles. Thrust into the pocket of a coat he had left there when he had started to fly was an envelope. His heart bounced and suddenly his eyes were ablaze. He opened it eagerly and there was a mixture of dread and anticipation within him as he unfolded the typewritten sheet within. His body seemed to freeze as he read:

DEAR LIEUTENANT FARRELL:

Are you convinced now that you had better stay on the ground while you are in Mexico?

THE HAWK.

CHAPTER V

FOR a moment Russ stood there as though turned to stone. Delroy glanced at him and said quickly:

"What's the matter?"

Russ scarcely heard the question. His mind was racing ahead in a mad endeavor to find some logical way in which that note, signed with the familiar signature, could have been placed there by anyone other than Blackie Williams.

Whatever doubts he might have had before were dissipated, and as his last hope that Blackie might be innocent was wiped from his mind, it seemed as though the world had fallen in ruins at his feet. It was not alone that Blackie had disappointed him, but somehow it seemed to the eager young pilot as though he had learned a lesson that changed life from a bright and desirable thing into an ordeal in which no one could be trusted.

He was almost surprised when he found Duke Delroy alongside him. The blond flyer read the

note quickly; the next second his eyes were flaming into Farrell's.

"I guess," he said, his voice vibrant, "that that settles the works."

Russ nodded mutely. The stocky chief pilot, who had been talking with one of the mechanics, came toward them.

"You might be interested in this, Paddock," Delroy said airily. "The Hawk flew into Russ's locker here and left a little *billet-doux*."

"Huh?" It was a short, savage bark. Paddock grabbed at the paper and as he read it his battered face was like a thundercloud. He crumpled the note in his hand as though it were the Hawk himself whom he was destroying.

Suddenly Russ found himself snapping out of the daze he had been in. It was as though he had hardened inside somehow, and he felt that he would never give nor ask for quarter from Blackie Williams or any other living soul.

"See here," he said. "That note wasn't here when we started on the flight, of course. Who could have planted it in my pocket since we've been gone?"

For a moment there was no answer as the veteran chief pilot appeared to be marshaling his

forces. Then he said slowly, "I haven't been off the field, and I can't see how it could have been planted by anybody except one of our men or—"

He hesitated there—unwilling to go further.

"Blackie Williams," Delroy finished for him. "Is that what you intended to say?"

"Uh, huh. Was your locker locked?"

Russ shook his head. "Blackie came in to change his clothes when he got back, I presume?" he asked.

"Sure."

"There's no possibility of someone's sneaking in here from the outside without being seen, is there?" Delroy inquired.

"No. There hasn't been a moment when some one of our men hasn't been in here. I'll ask 'em now, just to make sure." He made off rapidly and stopped at the door to speak to a lanky mechanic.

Russ, his head bent in thought, was taking off his coveralls mechanically. Delroy strolled toward his own locker and it seemed there was a new note in his voice as he sang to himself:

"When Gabe blows his trump, in de sweet bye an' bye,
Ah may not git into Heaben, but Ah'll surely try.
Pharaoh's army got drownded.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep."

Russ scarcely noticed a car drawing up before the door of the hangar. He was putting on his coat without realizing it. He was trying to decide what to do. If one of their trio of flyers had turned traitor, then the perilous task before the other two had become one of almost insuperable difficulty. There was no iron-clad proof that Blackie was an ally of the Hawk's or that he was the Hawk himself, and yet it would be suicidal to delay taking action. They must know positively where Blackie stood. If he had turned traitor—and there seemed no reasonable doubt of it—then at any second in a crisis he would turn against the men who were supposed to be his comrades and they would be helpless.

And even if that did not happen, he would keep the enemy informed of every move they intended to make and success would be impossible. The thing that must be done, and done immediately, was to eliminate Williams from the entire undertaking. Bleakly, Russ decided that he must lay the cards on the table in front of White and Ransome—

"Here's Blackie now!"

As Delroy said those words it seemed that there was a laugh in his voice. His slim body was

electric with anticipation, and the light dancing in his gray eyes was the reflection of the young flyer's delight in any crisis.

Russ stiffened as though a shock had gone through him and he whirled toward the door as though ready to repulse a physical onslaught.

"Hi!" Blackie said casually to the two oil field company men. "Well, Russ, dog-gone you, if there's been any doubt about your bearing a charmed life, there isn't any left now. Duke, my respects."

The broad-shouldered Texan was strolling toward them across the hangar floor, his sombrero tilted casually and his dark face more quizzical than usual. Russ found himself unable to answer for a moment, but his eyes never left Blackie's face.

The two men at the door left the hangar hurriedly as though to collect all the information possible before Blackie left. Delroy's eyes were playing over Williams as though the nonchalant young oil man were looking at a new and remarkable specimen of humanity. There was a compound of admiration, surprise, and humorous mockery in his attitude as he absently hummed the chorus of his favorite song:

"Oh, Mary, don' you weep, don' you moan—
Oh, Mary, don' you weep, don' you moan—
Pharaoh's army got drownded.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep."

Blackie's narrow, sloping eyes seemed to become even narrower as no word came from his two allies. He glanced from one to the other with growing wonderment as he came down close to them, and one side of his mouth drooped sardonically as he asked:

"What's the matter? Have I turned into a ghost or something? Or is there a spot on my nose?"

His eyes finally found Farrell's and lingered there. As he sensed the fact that Russ was holding himself in control with a desperate effort, the ex-outlaw's face seemed to harden slightly and there was no lightness in his voice as he sneered:

"What's up? Spill it!"

As Russ stooped to pick up the note that had been dropped on the floor, he didn't remove his gaze from Blackie.

"You might be interested in this," he said, and despised himself because his voice broke with the strain.

Williams took one look at the note.

"Oh, ho!" he said, half to himself. "What do you make of this, Watson?"

"I'd hate to tell you, Blackie," Duke Delroy said airily. "It certainly looks as if somebody knew what was going to happen, doesn't it?"

Williams' mouth seemed to become thinner and both corners were pulled down as he gazed intently at the crumpled sheet of paper. His black eyebrows were arched and a new light was in his eyes. He whistled softly to himself for a second and then said, "What about it? Who could have put it here?"

Suddenly it seemed that Russ could control himself no longer. It was as though an irresistible pressure within him literally forced him into speech.

"Blackie, what was the matter with your motor?" he snapped.

As Blackie caught the import in the younger man's words, his eyes seemed to become opaque. "Search me," he said, with outward lightness. "Just cut dead. You know as much about it as I do——"

"How did it come on again?" Russ exploded.

"That, my boy," Williams said carefully, "is somewhat of a mystery to me. Only one explana-

tion I can think of. The jet must have been plugged and the plug blew out finally——"

"But you didn't do any steep diving that we noticed," Delroy told him.

Both Delroy and Russ were watching Williams closely, alert for the slightest sign of discomfiture. Blackie glanced from one to the other and new lines leaped into being around his nostrils and eyes.

"Just what are you two eggs getting at?" he drawled, so slowly that there was a perceptible pause between each word.

"Well, for one thing," Delroy said, leaning casually against a locker, "the dope is that this note could not have got in Russ's pocket through anybody except one of the men working here on the field or——"

"One of us," Blackie finished for him. "Is that what you mean?"

"Exactly!" blazed Russ. "Furthermore, whoever put it here knew what was going to happen——"

"Or what had happened," Delroy put in. "We mustn't forget this. If this Hawk guy has an ally around these diggings—or is around here himself, maybe, he might take advantage of a purely accidental happening, make it seem as though

he had arranged it and put this note here just to scare us and send Russ back to the States with his tail between his legs."

For a moment there was silence. Williams appeared to increase in stature, somehow, and his hawk-like face grew steadily blacker. Russ did not notice the expression in his eyes. That dark face had grown grim and cruel, but somehow there seemed to be suffering in those eyes.

"Furthermore," Russ burst forth, "every man on this field has been carefully investigated and there isn't a breath of suspicion against any of them. Unless what's-his-name—the chief pilot, I mean—found out within the last two minutes that there's been some stranger sneaking in here while we were gone, it looks very much as though the man that placed this note here and who is an ally of the Hawk's is right among us!"

"Oh, why don't you come out with it?" Blackie said harshly.

He looked at the two flyers as a king might have looked at groveling subjects. They might have been children whom he could handle with consummate ease, and for whose ability he had nothing but savage contempt.

"You mean that you think I fixed a parachute, faked a forced landing, made you jump, sup-

posedly to your death, and then came back here and planted this note when the stunt didn't work! Come on now, be men, and come out with it!"

The very fact that Russ was suffering as he had never suffered before lashed him into forthright speech from which he would ordinarily have shrunk.

"Suppose we do think that?" he said, taking a step toward the lean Texan. "Why shouldn't we? And what have you got to say about it?"

For a moment Blackie was like a statue. There was thunder and lightning in his long, narrow eyes and his mouth was a mere curved slash across his face. The atmosphere was heavy with menace as he faced his enemies as though daring them to come on. He raised his hand slowly and pushed his sombrero farther back on his head. His body seemed to slump. He bent one knee and his shoulders drooped. His eyes found the ground, and there was something unutterably weary in his voice as he said slowly, "Not a thing, I guess —not one dog-goned thing!"

"Sure?" snapped Russ. "If you have anything to say I don't know a better time to say it. I'm leaving for town in just about one minute, and if you haven't a word to say it looks as if the job were pretty near done, Blackie."

Russ was gazing with hot eyes at the man who had aroused his interest and respect as no other human being had ever done. He was almost beside himself with mingled emotions that fought for mastery. At that moment, he hated the man who had disillusioned him, and his big body was quivering with the strain.

Blackie Williams was just a born outlaw, that was all, Russ told himself furiously—a crooked roughneck who did not stop at murder!

But despite the anger raging within him, he got a shock when Williams raised his eyes. For just a second it seemed as if Blackie Williams' soul were bared to his gaze. It was as if the light had been snuffed from life for him and as if he were looking into a future that held nothing but pain. There was shame and heartbreak and bitter discouragement in his face; he had the look of a man who has seen his all swept away.

Then suddenly the sardonic suspect threw back his head. His body straightened and his eyes became two lines of light beneath lowered lids. His mouth widened in a contemptuous sneer, and he seemed about to spring.

"So I'm the fall guy, am I?" he said with slow savagery. "You've tried me and condemned me, have you, you brats, accusing me of murder? Be

that as it may. Got it all nicely settled with your one-track minds, have you? Going to leap into town and tell the boss you've got the Hawk with your little hatchet, are you? All right—go ahead! You think you've got it all figured out, do you? Well, either you two get out of this little job or I do, that's a cinch, and we'll see just how we come out, and who's the biggest around here. Great pals, aren't you? Giving me an even break, I suppose!"

For some reason or other each word Williams spoke seared Russ to the quick. There was such unutterable contempt and blazing hatred behind those words that the impulsive youngster felt himself withering before the blast of Williams' wrath.

"You might be interested in this," Williams went on contemptuously. "They've just got a wire in Tampico and the detectives that have been looking up Arch Avery found out something. He had a brother back in Minneapolis who was in the Army Air Service during the war and Arch not only visited him for two months at Kelly Field but was turned down by the Army Air Service on account of his eyes. Then Arch took civilian flying lessons for a while, trying to get into the Air Service by that method. That might

interest you strangely. Or again, it might not——"

"That wouldn't stop him from having an ally around here. He's not alone!" Russ broke in. His suffering was so great that there was perverse satisfaction in making it greater. The strain of the situation and the bitterness of his disillusionment had turned him temporarily into a sort of madman striving to hurt the thing he loved. For the moment he was beyond logic or reason, rushing ahead because he could not do otherwise.

"Now listen, Russ," Delroy said quickly, "let's not go off half cocked. We might be wrong."

"Oh, no—nothing like that! That would be impossible for the great Russ Farrell!" Williams spat.

Farrell glanced quickly at Delroy. The Duke seemed unhappy, more or less uncertain, and scarcely able to decide what to do.

"Say all you like, Blackie," Farrell raved, "but if you think that we're going to stick our heads into a lion's mouth when we know what's going on——"

"Get on your flying clothes pronto!"

That shout resounded through the hangar. The three men turned as though pulled by one string. It was Appleton, one of the oil field flyers, and he

was speeding toward them across the big hangar floor.

"Just got a radio message," he yelled breathlessly. "Three airplanes were sighted over Cordoba, headed for Rebrache, and flying high!"

"What?" yelled Delroy, and the shout was so loud that it reverberated from the hangar roof.

"Then we've got to get going," Williams snapped. "There's your dog-goned Hawk in spite of this note!"

"What makes you so sure?" Delroy demanded. The handsome young pilot was fairly on fire and Russ found himself almost unbearably taut, as though in sympathy with the intense excitement that had seized Williams and the Duke.

"I'll tell you why," barked Williams as he tore off his coat. "Not a soul except a half dozen big bugs were supposed to know it, but the oil company secretly shipped close to a half million dollars in cash to be stored at Rebrache for the pay rolls all through the fields, and the regular pay-roll trips from Tampico were to be fakes to fool the Hawk. Outside of me, there isn't a soul lower than a treasurer and three high bank officials who is supposed to know anything about it——"

"But the Hawk does evidently!" blazed Russ.

Blackie, who had flung the door of his locker open, whirled like a shot. "Another nail in my coffin, eh?" he sneered. "Well, we've got only two ships now. I guess you'd better stay home."

"You're staying home, Williams," barked Delroy.

Out on the line a motor burst into a deep roar.

"I am, am I?" shouted Williams.

For the first time in Farrell's entire acquaintance with the saturnine adventurer, he saw Blackie Williams facing a real crisis. Gone was the languid ease and effortless poise with which he met the ordinary emergencies of life and he was like some flaming superman who would not be denied. In the twinkle of an eye a gun was in his hand.

"I'm still your boss, you brats," he told them icily, "and I go. Understand? If the two of you want to take the other ship, O. K., or either of you separately, it's all the same to me. If you're yellow, stay behind, but don't try to stop me, or as sure as there's a heaven above us, I'll plug you. Get some sense! Get on your clothes! Snap it up, you two, and we'll settle this other business when we get time!"

There were a thousand things Russ wanted to say but could not. He felt himself caught up in

a resistless rush of excitement. He seemed to be swept along in a stream against which he was helpless. He found himself tearing off his coat and getting into his flying clothes as though in a dream. Williams was already rushing toward the line where the second motor in the untested ship had joined the mighty chorus that fairly made the hangar walls shake.

"We're a couple of star-spangled nuts, kid," came Delroy's voice, and there was laughter and excitement and a sort of mad delight in it, "but we're on our way!"

Suddenly Russ's head cleared. His blue eyes were shining and his freckled face radiant as high adventure loomed before him.

"If we don't get them," he half shouted, "we'll get some dope one way or another."

"May heaven have mercy on our souls," chortled Delroy. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER VI

FIVE minutes later the two Bullets were roaring southward over the monte. Blackie, in the untested ship, was nearly a quarter of a mile ahead of Russ and Delroy, and Russ was very thankful that his deliberate maneuvers to stay in back had been successful. What lay ahead he did not know, but there was one thing he felt certain would occur. Blackie would not do his work obviously—he was too smart for that—but at some time during the next two hours the red-headed pilot was certain that their supposed ally would find a way to be of assistance to the outlaws. Once he had tried murder to get rid of Russ. It would not be strange if, during the course of the battle—if there was a battle—he would find a way to dispose of Russ and Delroy once and for all.

As Russ sent his shiny ship ever higher above the jungle, the twelve-cylinder motor wide open, he scarcely noticed the wilderness below. His mind was too much occupied to have any room for thought about lack of landing fields. It seemed

that Blackie's fiery insistence on making the trip was simply another proof of his guilt.

"The Duke and I could have flown the two ships and he could have stayed behind," Russ was thinking. "If I knew that I was under suspicion and that those I was with wouldn't be worth much because they were watching me as much as the enemy, I'd stay behind until things were cleared up. He just wants to be on hand so we can't do any harm."

On the other hand there was Williams' frank statement that besides himself no one but the high officials and respected business men knew anything about the cache of currency at the remote pumping station.

During the last few minutes before taking off, Delroy had said in a manner that indicated plainly his utter astonishment:

"I can't get it. That Hawk guy, whoever he is, knows that money is there or he wouldn't be on his way. Great guns, Russ, we don't know what man we're fighting. It may be one of our own bosses as well as Blackie!" And Russ could not help but agree.

His eyes roved automatically from oil gauge to tachometer, to the thermometer, as he reflected:

"If one of the real big bugs like White or

Ransome was crooked on the side and was robbing his own company by backing this Hawk, that makes Blackie's connection with everything much more logical. Those higher-ups would have to join in with the others, of course, on the outside, but all the mystery about where the Hawk gets his dope would be solved that way."

His gaze shifted momentarily to Blackie's ship ahead of them. He was not going to give Williams any opportunity to get in a quick, unexpected shot at them if he could help it. He was wondering what in the world he could do. There would be three certain enemies to fight in a few minutes and very probably a fourth one besides——

As though the desperateness of his predicament was such that it was beyond worrying about, he suddenly thrust out his jaw as though daring fate to do its worst. He could not turn back because he wasn't sure. There was nothing to do but trust to luck, and no amount of figuring or planning could be of any help to him if Blackie Williams turned against him.

This one thing though he knew: that the first suspicious move on Williams' part would find him prepared. He had turned into an automaton who would have no mercy on the dark ex-outlaw ahead of him.

Rebrache was sixty-five miles away, the Duke had said, and the planes had been reported from a point of fifty miles south of the oil station. Their ships would not be as fast as the Bullets and if luck was with him, the outlaws would not have been at their destination more than five minutes before the Curtins arrived.

There was another knotty point. As Delroy had said during those last few hectic moments on the ground:

"If the Hawk isn't one of those three, it will be the first time he has failed to be on the job when there was something big up. But that signature on your note is his and nobody else's, and so was the other one that you got in the club!"

If that was true it meant that the aërial outlaw was in Tampico and not in one of those ships. For the moment it seemed to Russ that he was fighting some enemy who was more than human. Then he got hold of himself and soliloquized swiftly:

"I'm getting to be like a kid afraid of the dark. This bird gets a big kick in advertising himself and doing all this mysterious note-writing and grandstanding, that's all."

They had been in the air thirty-five minutes when he turned to Delroy and pointed to his

wrist-watch. Delroy nodded. If ordinarily he was a vital personality who fairly exuded energy and joy in living, he was now a veritable dynamo. It seemed as if the news of those three ships almost certainly bound for the biggest haul the Hawk had ever made, had lit a fire within him. For some reason the Duke seemed astonished, bewildered, and utterly delighted all at once to an extent that was scarcely explainable by the mere fact that they were about to come to grips with their enemy. Russ himself was quivering with eagerness but even he, impulsive and eager as he was, was not transfigured as the Duke was.

Russ strained his eyes over the colorful jungle trying to spot the station. It should come in view any moment now. Far to the east of them two gaunt derricks reared their crown blocks to the sky, and westward three neatly painted buildings and some tanks and a battery of pumps indicated a relay pumping station. Here and there an opening broke the monotony of the tangled monte and one rutted road was like a white streak through the luxuriant growth which covered the ground.

It was hard to remember that uncounted pipe lines were buried beneath the ground below and that at dozens of points there were wells and

pumping stations and isolated drilling camps. He had always thought of an oil field as a compact group of wells.

Suddenly he leaned his head out the side of the cockpit and strained his eyes ahead. In the sky a few miles ahead of them were two black specks. He pointed and so far forgot himself in his excitement that he failed to take into account the terrific air stream compounded of his speed and the propeller wash. His arm was thrown back and almost dislocated before he stiffened it against the pressure. Delroy nodded vigorously and significantly patted the machine guns that swung on a scarf mount in the rear cockpit.

Russ took a look at his instruments and throttled slightly as though to rest the motor before he should call upon it for its all. Blackie, a quarter of a mile ahead, was hurtling southward with unslackened speed. A moment later Russ could see their destination. There were a half dozen derricks in an area three quarters of a mile square, and in the center of the rough circle they described the jungle had been cleared. Huge sumps—storage places for oil—were like black sheets against the green. Half a dozen rough roads twisted and turned to the wells and a dozen

black storage tanks were connected by pipe lines. In the very center a big shed masking a battery of pumps was the center for several large pipe lines.

For just a second Russ wondered why those pipes gleamed as white as snow, but he forgot that as his attention centered on one airplane that was on the ground. The other two were still circling. He almost jumped in his seat as the motor suddenly died to a whisper. The next second Delroy was shouting in his ear.

"Don't worry. I cut it. That's the Hawk as sure as you're alive. He always does that stunt when he has more than one ship. One lands and gets the swag and the other protects him from the air with machine guns. Leaves a whole regiment helpless on the ground, see?"

Russ nodded as he turned the motor on again. That was the old method of the Border patrol. One machine in the air could handle an army on the ground if there was ammunition enough. They were but three miles away now, and apparently still unnoticed by the outlaw flyers who were circling the pumping station steadily. Two miles beyond it a large settlement of thatch-roofed huts must be the original Mexican town of Rebrache. Dozens of peons dotted the crude

street, and now Russ could see that around every well there were men standing motionless watching the planes.

In front of the group of screened buildings that were doubtless the living quarters of the oil men, there were still others; and no one was even moving in his tracks.

"Well trained, I see," Russ thought excitedly.

His heart was pounding and every nerve in his body seemed to be leaping within him as he tried to make a plan. They were higher than the circling outlaw ships, almost two thousand feet higher, in fact; it gave them the advantage. But what about Blackie Williams?

Suddenly a thought occurred to Russ. One ship was on the ground now. He could see an excited group just emerging from one of those screened buildings. Probably one of them, or perhaps two, would be from the ship which had landed. Blackie or no Blackie, there was one way to make sure that their mission was not entirely unsuccessful.

He cut the gun and turned to yell to Delroy. He saw that the circling planes had seen them. One of them started climbing like mad. The other stayed on guard as two men fairly shot from the group he had noticed on the ground and dashed

toward their ship, almost a quarter of a mile away. There was but one landing field and that was on the outskirts of the camp. Farrell's voice rang out shrill with excitement as he shouted his desperate plan to Delroy.

"O. K.," shouted that blond young daredevil. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER VII

RUSS took one look at Blackie. He was just starting to dive earthward. Then he shoved the stick forward almost as far as it would go. He did not cut the motor. That ship which was the last word in airplanes would be tested to its utmost capacity in the next moment.

He was four thousand feet high. Within five seconds he was diving like a meteor straight for that plane on the ground. He trusted to Delroy to watch their enemies, were there two or three of them in the air. He himself kept his eyes on the ship below and the two men who were speeding toward it.

The air speed meter went from one hundred and fifty miles an hour to one hundred and seventy-five, two hundred—and still Russ did not falter. He was crouched behind his windshield to prevent the breath from being torn from his nostrils and every once in a while he glanced at his instruments as the speed meter went ever higher. Two hundred and twenty-five, two hundred and fifty——

Every strut was leaping in its socket and that marvelous ship was quivering in every brace and spar. The landing and flying wires were wide blurs and the scream of the wind through them almost drowned the frantic roar of the motor.

Could he beat those flyers to their own ship? He did not want to kill them.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the outlaw ships send a burst of machine gun bullets into the ground as the knot of men in front of the buildings started to scatter. Not a soul on the ground dared to shoot at the fleeing airmen, apparently, or else they had no weapons handy.

Fifteen hundred feet high, and the air speed meter needle was jammed tight against the peg which read three hundred miles an hour! It seemed as if the ship could not stand another moment of it, but still Russ did not draw back on the throttle.

The men below were almost beside their ship now. It looked as if he could not carry out his plan to keep them on the ground.

He felt a grip on his shoulder and to his dying day he will never forget what he saw as he turned. Scarcely two hundred yards behind them and on their tail was the ship that had been doing guard duty. The flyers on the ground were out of danger

from the oil men now. They were ready to fly away. From the guns of the outlaw ship came spurts of red. Russ did not know it then, but there were bullet holes in his right wing as he swerved automatically to spoil their line of fire. Directly behind the outlaw ship was Blackie Williams; and behind Blackie, five hundred feet higher, the remaining enemy plane was firing at Williams. Four ships were diving terrifically in single file, each one shooting at the ship ahead of it.

Blackie, of course, knew that he had an enemy on his tail because he was swerving as though to spoil its aim, but always he was shooting at the ship that had Russ in its power. Blackie was deliberately allowing himself to be a target in order to save Russ and Delroy from destruction—and he did it.

Just as the windshield in front of Russ shattered into a thousand pieces from one of the enemy's bullets, the khaki colored plane fell on its side. The next second it was speeding downward out of control and Russ got one lightning-like glimpse of a single figure slumped in its front seat. Blackie had got him, and as his Bullet went into a terrific bank to escape the remaining outlaw ship, Russ turned back to his work again.

It was well that he did. His mind had been a

riot of conflicting emotions but the shock of seeing the ground almost hitting him in the face wrought a magical change in him. Suddenly his mind was as clear as crystal. The infernal din of the racing motor and screaming wires was forgotten. That his ears were ringing with the steep descent and his eyes watering as the terrific air stream crept in under his goggles seemed to make no difference.

The plane on the ground was in motion and Russ was still three hundred feet high but flashing earthward with almost incredible speed. The outlaw plane was in the air now, climbing madly. For a moment his hands tightened on the gun control alongside the stick. No, it would do no good to kill them——

An explosion that shook his own ship was followed by a crimson glare that momentarily seemed almost to cover the ground. Blackie's victim had crashed and the gas tank had exploded. Russ swerved slightly. Now he was but a hundred feet from the fleeing plane, behind it and above it. If he could only get the man in it alive, perhaps the job would be done in one fell swoop. It must be that one of those men was the Hawk.

Careless of the air stream, which was like a solid substance fighting him, he leaned out of

the side of his cockpit, holding his goggles to keep them from being ripped from his head. He could not breathe, but his mind was miraculously clear and his eyes held steady as he darted toward his prey. Three hundred hours in the air and hundreds of emergencies where there was but a hair's breadth between himself and disaster had contributed to the expertness that enabled him to handle his stick with such fine drawn skill that an eighth of an inch was automatically and accurately estimated.

His body was stiff as a poker as the outlaw ship loomed before him and a hail of bullets from the free swinging gun mounted on its rear cockpit poured straight into the radiator. His eyes were on the tail controls. A split second later he eased the stick forward an infinitesimal fraction of an inch. The wheels of his undercarriage ripped through the rear end of his adversary's fuselage as though it had been paper. The next instant the Bullet was arching upward in a mighty zoom that carried it eighteen hundred feet higher without a break.

That ship might crash without killing its occupants, now.

Russ's eyes swept the sky. At almost the same altitude as his, Blackie and the remaining outlaw

ship were engaged in mortal combat. They were twisting and turning through the sky like huge dragon flies, and scarcely a second passed without a burst from the guns of one or the other. The enemy ship had two men, and rear seat guns, Blackie was alone.

Russ's eyes darted to the ground in time to see what happened. The ship which he had collided with in his desperate effort to avoid shooting down the fugitives crashed into an oil derrick, out of control. The gaunt structure of unpainted boards crumpled like a house of cards as the heavy motor ripped down through it and shattered on the heavy cast iron valve. Those flyers were killed inevitably.

Then there burst on his vision a sight that momentarily paralyzed him. He forgot those ships above as it seemed that a vast bonfire had been lit in the very air.

He was far to one side of the wreck, but he could see it plainly. For an interval of fifteen feet above the well and the wrecked ship there was no fire except for what was dwarfed into a tiny bonfire—the ship itself burning. But, starting fifteen feet high in the air, a vast cloud of red-hot black smoke was bellowing over the earth.

Russ knew something about oil and immedi-

ately he grasped the explanation. The valve had been knocked from the top of the flowing oil well, and all Mexican wells in that vicinity were heavy gassers. The gas had not ignited until it had expanded, some fifteen feet up in the air. There it burst into flames started by sparks from the wreck and was consuming the oil in an aërial conflagration. He could feel the heat of it, far away from it as he was.

It was a scene of horrid grandeur, but Russ had no time to admire it or to speculate on the almost limitless possibilities for destruction that lay within that mass of smoke. His eyes were on the combat above him, and as he started to climb desperately he felt as though he must help lift his ship upward faster.

Blackie was on his way down now, twisting and turning to escape the bullets of the enemy.

"Out of ammunition, or out of control, or hurt!" Russ thought.

There could be no doubt about it. Blackie had ceased to fight back and the other ship had him at its mercy. Only Williams' marvelous mastery of the airplane had saved him during the past few seconds, but no flyer in the world in his predicament could hope to reach the ground safely. Then, as though an evil fate were piling blow

on blow to destroy the aërial policemen, Russ heard Delroy's voice shouting in his ear, "Look at your thermometer!"

Farrell, climbing automatically, glanced at it. The mercury stood at a hundred degrees Centigrade, and that meant that the water was boiling. In a second he realized what had happened. Bullets from the outlaw ship he had fought had poured into the radiator, and most of the water had leaked out. It was but a question of seconds, probably, before his motor would be useless, and fire was a strong possibility.

Blackie was below him now and five hundred yards to one side. He was endeavoring to maneuver himself into the dense black smoke of the oil well fire to escape his Nemesis. The pursuing plane was also below Russ, firing steadily at the elusive target beneath it.

In an instant Russ made up his mind. He must save Blackie, motor or no motor. As he threw his ship into a bank and got on the tail of the enemy plane, he cut the gun momentarily and yelled, "You'd better jump. There's no need of both of us——"

"Aren't you funny!" yelled Delroy. "Ride him, cowboy—you've got the guns!"

But Russ didn't have the guns. The enemy

plane was too far below him now for accurate shooting, but nevertheless he pressed the gun controls; and the Marlins did not answer.

"One of those bullets jimmed up the C. C. gear!" he thought despairingly.

He continued to hold his ship in the dive automatically. It was flashing downward toward the enemy now at two hundred miles an hour. Blackie was partially concealed by thin wisps of smoke on the rim of the fire. The heat was terrific, and growing more intense every instant as Russ hurtled closer to the conflagration. Blackie must be suffering the tortures of the damned already and if he got fairly into that mass of smoke, death would be almost certain.

Then and there Russ made up his mind. Fate had pounded him into a state that approached physical insensibility. There was no fear in him, and life itself seemed bound up in one single objective. Foot by foot he overtook the plane below. It was banking and twisting in an endeavor to keep a bead on Blackie. Russ was conscious of the fact that a stream of lead from the rear guns of the bandits below was pouring into his radiator, which acted as a shield.

He was but twenty-five feet from the bandits now, and it must be that they realized that all the

guns on his ship were useless. The man in the rear seat was firing steadily, but there was no attempt on their part to get out of his way. Russ's wings were a mass of bullet holes and the duralumin struts did not have an inch of surface undented by the hail of bullets from below.

Now he was almost on top of them and the time had come to dare his all. Blackie was almost hidden by the smoke now and Russ himself could scarcely breathe. Veteran of a thousand emergencies of the air as he was, he had never been so certain that death or serious injury awaited him as he was when he deliberately thrust his head over the side of the cockpit and out of the bullet-proof shelter of his motor. He had to look to make sure of what he was doing—

It seemed as if a red-hot iron had seared the side of his neck in the instant before his metal prop cut through the tail surface of the outlaw plane. He held onto consciousness long enough to jam his stick to the left and forward. The Curtin tore loose from its victim and whipped backward and downward out of the range of fire of the rear guns. He got a flash-like impression of a leather-masked face in that rear cockpit; then unconsciousness came like blessed escape from a world gone mad.

He came to briefly an hour later to find his aching head bandaged as well as his neck. He was lying on a cot that was one of four in a bare room. It was just getting dark and through the screens that were the only walls in the room he could see that the fire was still raging.

"Delroy brought the ship down, and there must have been a wreck," he thought vaguely.

A Mexican boy was sitting outside, but Russ was too weak and his head was pounding too cruelly for him to bother to ask questions. Wondering about Blackie, he lapsed back into slumber that was almost a coma.

He awakened again three hours later and this time his head was clearer and he felt a great deal better. The fire was still raging and the eerie glow of it lighted the room sufficiently for him to see the figure of a man on the cot farthest from him.

It was Blackie Williams, fully clothed, and apparently sleeping the sleep of the dead.

A great wave of gladness swept over the young flyer. Blackie was all right—all right in far more than a physical sense. He had fought like a madman that afternoon—more than that, he had risked almost certain death to save the lives of

the two men who had accused him of being a traitor.

It was characteristic of the sensitive Farrell that he entirely forgot his own efforts to save Blackie and he was thinking miserably, "I wonder if he'll ever forgive us."

Blackie stirred, and his eyes opened. The lean Texan sat up, and his eyes met Farrell's. For a moment it seemed as if Russ could not speak. Then he said awkwardly, "Am I hurt badly?"

There was no softening in Blackie's face as he returned shortly: "No. Bullet creased you and you hit your head on the compass, landing."

"Where's the Duke?"

"Left for his oil camp in a car going that way."

Russ strove to say the words that were on the tip of his tongue, but somehow he could not. The hundred apologies and pleas for forgiveness that he would have liked to utter were almost choking him, but the coldness in Blackie was like a dam of ice that held them back. Williams slumped back on the bed, his arms behind his head.

"Everybody's fighting the fire, I suppose?" Russ stammered finally.

"Uh huh."

"Did we get any of 'em alive?"

"No. Couldn't even identify any of 'em."

"Well, then, I guess the Hawk's wings are clipped, eh?" Russ said with an effort.

There was no answer from the other bed. Williams lay motionless, staring at the ceiling.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

The two flyers turned toward the door. Russ was startled because he had heard no sound. The next second he had snapped up in bed, his mouth open with astonishment. Standing five feet from him was a very tall, very broad-shouldered and very powerful man, lounging easily with long legs bent slightly as he leaned against the wall. His face was covered with a leather mask that fitted it almost as closely as though it were his skin. There were dark glasses covering the eye holes, and behind the opening provided for the mouth Russ could see gleaming white teeth with a prominent gold filling in one of them. The man's head was covered with a soft leather helmet that met the mask over his forehead, except at the right temple. There face-covering and helmet did not quite join, and a stray lock of black hair was visible.

"I heard you were sick," came that deep bass

voice, with a laugh; "so I thought I'd call before I borrowed one of your ships."

"Who in Tophet are you?"

It was Blackie, and his question was like a blow.

"I haven't a card with me," laughed the stranger, "but you'd probably recognize my signature. People have got into the habit of calling me the Hawk. Silly name, what?"

CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS as though the words brought Russ back to himself. Suddenly it swept over him that the outlaw before him was actually the man they were after, even though it seemed scarcely believable that he would walk deliberately into the lair of his enemies. The young flyer's eyes clung to the Hawk as though held by magnetic attraction. What manner of man could this be? The utter self-confidence and assurance that must lie back of his presence made Russ feel that his capture would be impossible under any circumstances.

"How do you feel, Lieutenant?" the Hawk inquired, sauntering over to Russ's bed. "You weren't hurt badly this afternoon, I trust?"

The booming voice seemed always to have a slight chuckle behind it. That the Hawk was enjoying himself hugely was as obvious as though he were unmasked and the grin on his face and the shine of his eyes were visible.

"I'm not so hot," Russ said finally, "but I'm not helpless either."

"Good!" said the Hawk. "That's fine, for you and Blackie here are about to take a little walk."

"Yes? Where to?" drawled Blackie.

Russ stiffened in his bed as the possible implication of the Hawk's words swept over him.

"Oh, just a little ways away so that we won't be interrupted," the Hawk said easily. "I think that I'll get you ready for it now. Blackie, get up, will you? I hate to bother you because I know you're tired, but we must be moving. I'll do a little supervising first while you tie Russ's hands behind his back. Come on—shake it up!" With the last words the outlaw's voice changed suddenly and there was a little hard note in it.

The helpless Blackie got up and asked calmly, "What do I tie him with?"

"I brought some safety wire," the Hawk replied. Both of his hands moved quickly. The next second a gun was in his right and a coil of thin yellow wire in the left.

"Here you are," he said politely.

Blackie took the wire and started to bind Russ's wrists behind his back.

"No need to make him uncomfortable," the Hawk said. "Don't get them too close together. Give him a little room."

In a moment Williams had finished his work.

Russ's hands were bound loosely behind his back.

"Now I'll attend to you, Blackie," the stranger said. "I hope you don't mind."

As he bound Blackie in the same manner, Russ was photographing every detail of the amazing bandit's appearance in his mind. Although only slightly over six feet, he was a trimly built giant. His torso was almost barrel-like and tapered to flat hips and long, slender legs that were encased in riding breeches and field boots. The chamois jacket he wore was buttoned close around his neck and met the leather mask. It was a neat and somewhat dandified costume, with those colored eye-shields giving him the appearance of some devil of the night. That lock of black hair which protruded from his helmet lent the last touch of rakishness to his appearance.

"Now we will slip off to some comfortable and secluded spot," the outlaw informed them. "Then we can have a little chat without being interrupted."

As though his words were a signal, there came the sound of dragging feet approaching the bungalow.

"Not a word out of either of you," snapped the outlaw, and the next second he was stooped low as he sat on the bed facing the door. He was in

such a position that anyone coming in at the door would know he had a helmet on but could not be certain of the mask.

The screen door opened and a stocky, handsome young fellow, his dark face grimed with oil and dirt, entered, stumbling with weariness.

"Put 'em up!"

The newcomer's head snapped back so quickly that his big white sombrero almost fell off. His dark eyes gazed unbelievingly into the barrel of the stranger's gun.

"Hello, Richards," the Hawk said easily. "Come over here and turn your back to me."

Russ was to find out later that Richards, now assistant boss of the Rebrache pumping station, had been a Texas Ranger and that the turbulent look that came into his dark eyes meant that for a moment he was poised for a spring squarely into the mouth of that gun.

"Be yourself," the Hawk said suavely, "and get over here fast!"

These last words were spoken slowly, but there was deadly menace in every syllable. Apparently the Hawk knew his man. Richards came over as directed and as he turned to be bound he asked the other two captives, "Who is this hombre?"

"The well-known Hawk," Russ told him.

"None other!" chuckled the outlaw. "Come on, boys, and quickly. Get up, Farrell. You haven't far to go."

As though in a dream the three captives walked out of the house and up a slope behind it. Gnarled chaparral dotted its surface and by the time they had reached the crest Russ realized that they would be practically invisible to anyone more than a few yards away. He was feeling perfectly all right again. The excitement of the situation had made him forget any remnant of weakness within him and, despite the fact that he was bandaged, he was an exceedingly stalwart cripple. His mind was busy with a thousand fantastic schemes, from a plan for hurling himself at the legs of the outlaw like a football interferer and trusting to the other two to hurl themselves on him and knock him out, to the possibility of backing up to Blackie or Richards unobserved and loosening their bonds. All of the schemes were impossible and he quickly discarded them, but his mind did not leave the subject for an instant.

"A pretty kettle of fish this is!" he said in low tones to Blackie.

The Texan glanced at him briefly and his

saturnine face did not relax. That wordless look chilled the flaming young pilot as a bucket of ice water might. Again he realized that Blackie Williams hated him, and with reason. In a second the mad thrill of the situation was snuffed out as he thought miserably, "I guess Blackie and I aren't pals any more."

Richards, his face sullen behind his closely clipped black mustache, dragged along wearily and slumped to the ground without a word when the outlaw said, "Sit down for a moment, gentlemen."

Russ flopped to the ground awkwardly, resting on his imprisoned hands, and as his eyes swept over the valley they widened with awe.

"Gosh!" he said involuntarily.

"First time you've seen it, eh?" grunted Richards. "You boys certainly did raise Ned with a good oil station."

And they had. That Gargantuan fire in the air was like a ceiling of deep crimson over the earth. On the ground one of the big storage sumps was a lake of fire. Gangs of men were fighting desperately to subdue two fires in the chaparral surrounding the camp and on the side of the clearing opposite the burning sump one of the huge fifty-five-thousand-gallon storage tanks was like a fur-

nace. Apparently the Hawk was noticing that for the first time.

"What's the matter with your fire-fighting system?" he inquired casually. "If that tank collapses and lets that oil out, that north sump will catch fire, too."

"Don't we know it!" grated Richards. "It just caught fire and they are trying to drain the water from the bottom now."

Russ forgot the Hawk momentarily as that scene of utter destruction dazed him.

"Why draw off the water?" he asked mechanically.

"When she gets boiling it bubbles up and the tank overflows," Richards told him dully. "Burning oil going all over everywhere then."

"You can't put out the big fire, eh?" Russ inquired.

"No," Blackie told him. "Only way to put it out is to stop the flow of gas and oil and that airplane knocked the valve off so that there is no way to stop it until the fire's put out. Endless circle stuff!"

"How are you ever going to put it out, then?"

"They've sent into Tampico to see if we can't get a cannon," the young oil man told him wearily.

"I suppose I'm a nuisance," Russ said apologetically, "but what good is a cannon going to do?"

"If we fire across the mouth of the hole and get the shot just right, there's a chance it would create a momentary vacuum," Richards explained, "and cut off the stream of gas and oil for an instant. That might put out the whole fire. You see, the gas catches on fire in the air and that fire in turn burns up the oil."

"Very interesting," observed the Hawk. "I will say I'd shed more tears if I didn't know that the oil that's being burned up belongs to the big companies."

For a moment there was silence as the four men looked at the scene below them. It was like a glimpse into Hades, and the hundred or more men who were toiling at various points around the huge clearing seemed like devils working in the red glow of the fires. Their only endeavor now was to keep the conflagration from spreading, Russ could see, and almost every minute a new fire was under way. It was impossible for them to control the burning well and that sump seemed to present a hopeless task. It must burn itself out.

"Well," Blackie Williams said suddenly, "just

what are we doing sitting up here, Hawk, Buzzard, or whatever it is you like to be called? You weren't with your merry men this afternoon, were you?"

"I was not," the outlaw returned with elaborate ease, "for several reasons, one of them being that they weren't my men at all."

Blackie laughed harshly. "Tell that to your grandmother," he drawled. "Just because they failed, you hate to admit they're your men, eh?"

"Have it your way, my boy, have it your way," the outlaw said lightly. "As a matter of fact, though, I was delighted that you stopped them so thoroughly. Why, the crooks were poaching on my territory, and that's wrong—you know that. Shame the way these boys have no regard for law and order."

His grinning mockery made Russ's face relax and even Blackie smiled briefly.

"Before I take one of your ships, which I happen to need at the moment," the Hawk went on, "there are a couple of things that I want to explain to you two. The first one is that all three of you—including Delroy, Richards, not you—had better give up your jobs, and quickly."

"Yes?" Russ asked, his voice vibrant. "Why so?"

"For two reasons," the Hawk said grimly. He was stretched out full length facing his three captives and the glass eyes of his mask were shining in the firelight with a truly eerie effect. "Number one is that you can't win. I can outfight you, outfly you, outthink you, and outshoot you. If my tender heart wasn't my ruination, I could get rid of two of you now, then fly a few miles along the road after I got through with you and knock off Delroy. You'd better quit while your necks are intact, because the next time you fool with me, you're sunk!"

Somehow it seemed to Russ that the debonair bandit was playing a part and reveling in it. He was like an actor holding the center of the stage and enjoying every minute of it. Yet behind his words there was a supreme confidence in himself that sent up and down Russ's spine thrilling tingles of admiration mixed with a dread of what this hard-bitten dare-devil might do.

"That first reason being self-evident," the Hawk went on, "it seems unnecessary to add the second. But you're good boys, and I like you, and I hate to see you back a losing game when losing means that you start to push up daisies. You won't believe me, and I won't go into detail. I'll merely throw out the suggestion that every man's

hand is against you and that you're just three little babes in the woods, fighting more people than you know about, getting doublecrossed right and left, and that your little trio of flying cops isn't really that at all. You're just three little lambs being thrown to the wolves and I'm not the only wolf concerned, either."

"What do you mean?" snapped Russ, who was leaning forward tensely now.

The outlaw was talking with such casual sincerity, as though what he said was self-evident, that it was uncannily impressive.

"My dear boy," that booming voice told him, "you don't know the oil fields or some of the men you're dealing with. I tell you those three ships weren't mine this afternoon. Of course, I knew what they were after, meaning the several hundred thousand dollars cached here——"

"Oh-ho!" Blackie interrupted, and nodded his head. His own dark eyes were alight as they rested on the Hawk and he nodded his head in satisfaction.

"I'll raise you one," grinned the bandit, "although I don't know just why you're so satisfied with yourself all of a sudden. I repeat that I knew the money was here and had planned to get it myself only they got the jump on me. Russ, you're

just a great kid thrown in the middle of something you know even less about than Blackie here, or Delroy. Of course, my object is to convince you boys that you'd better pick up your tents and silently steal away and not bother me any more. However, that doesn't alter the situation. Take this Rebrache thing right here. Around this territory they pay off Sancho Perana, who calls himself a general, and has an army of about three hundred on the excuse that he will protect the various companies from being looted by any one of the other bandit gangs who pass for revolutionaries. Am I right, Richards?"

Richards nodded.

"This Perana's position," the outlaw went on, "is a very peculiar one. In fact, as far as certain high-muck-amucks in the oil business go, he rules the roost, and gets the most unbelievable amount of money per month to do about five cents' worth of good that any spig ever got. I'm just proving to you that there are all kinds of complications and possibilities underneath the surface."

"Don't talk in riddles," Russ told him.

"No?" the Hawk said quizzically. He got to his feet slowly. "Well, consider this. Suppose some of the people who are outwardly entrusted with the task of protecting their companies from

the systematic looting which is going on, were really covering it and getting some of the dinero for themselves? Suppose they might even be backing me? Suppose that there might be two or three different gangs working against each other, all of them from inside? Suppose that a Mexican army and two fleets of airplanes and various officials were all concerned, fighting against each other but all fighting against the big companies whose chiefs sit up in New York and curse Mexican conditions?"

There was a moment of silence as though he had decided to let his words sink in. Then abruptly Blackie said, "It all sounds very pretty, big boy. You've thought up a fine fairy tale to scare us out. As a matter of cold fact, airplanes don't grow like mushrooms around this country. Those men this afternoon were yours, and you were lucky enough not to be with them. You got downright scared this afternoon and you're throwing a great big bluff to save yourself the trouble of fighting the only kind of organization that can lick you right now. It takes airplanes and flyers to lick airplanes and flyers."

"Well, that's enough of this," the Hawk said suddenly. Some of his elaborate suavity disappeared and his words were clipped off more

closely than was his custom. It seemed as though his mind was made up and that as he started to go into action, the dynamic personality that was his glowed more brightly. Russ could fairly feel the electric vitality that seemed to be thrown off from him.

"I've said my piece," he said tersely. "I'm telling you that some of the people you count on being behind you aren't behind you, and that you're just a gesture they're making. They don't give a hoot, and in fact, expect that you'll be knocked off. Regardless of that, though I'm talking for myself now, and I want you both to get this straight, and take what I say back to your boss. I've got a lot of debts to collect from these oil fields and I'm going to do it. Furthermore, I can do it, and I can wash everything up within a month. I'm going to pay back a lot of people in their own coin, and I'm going to get back from a lot of people the coin they took away from me, and I won't be stopped, understand? If you know what's best for you, you'll get out. I'm not a killer, but I can be——"

"I suppose not," Russ flared. "I suppose you didn't fix a parachute to get rid of me, or have it fixed——"

"Maybe I changed my mind after seeing what

a nice fellow you really were," the outlaw said mockingly. "Nothing to stop me now, is there, if I wanted to be bloodthirsty? Now get this. I said a minute back that I had the edge on your bosses every way, and I have. You ought to know that by this time. I know more about them and their business than they do themselves. And you can't win. If you're fools enough to keep on, it's your funeral. I've given you your chance."

He took out a cigarette and lit it. The eyes of the three men were on him unwinkingly. Russ could scarcely believe that what he was living through was anything but a fantastic nightmare. It had no tinge of reality about it. That tall bandit telling them the things he had told them, lined against the crimson glare of the fire in the interior of Mexico—revolutionary armies, airplane bandits, the brooding monte, and the story-book outlaw—it just could not be real in the twentieth century.

"I understand," the bandit went on, "that one of your ships is no good because the radiator is plugged full of holes and hasn't been fixed yet. The other ship, however, I shall now proceed to borrow from you, if you don't mind, and a really marvelous idea has struck me."

"You seem full of those things," Richards told him, a mixture of helpless wrath and grudging admiration in his eyes.

"This one," the bandit grinned, "is probably the best one I've had in my long and somewhat varied career. I've got about a hundred thousand dollars to go before I consider that my bills have been paid, and competition is getting awfully stiff. Why not do it in one fell swoop, say I? Having asked myself that question, the answer is, it shall be done, and it will close up my little Mexican chapter in a blaze of glory. How the peons will laugh! Lieutenant Farrell, you red-headed firebrand, I shall now give myself the honor of inviting you to be my guest in a certain remote section of Mexico to remain until such time as a one hundred thousand dollar ransom is paid for you. It will be a great pleasure, I assure you——"

"You're going to kidnap me?" Russ shouted. He found himself on his feet somehow, his big body half crouched as though to spring at his tormentor.

"Exactly," returned the Hawk. "We shall now take off, and you'll have a little vacation in the bosom of Mother Nature, as it were. Now sit

down and don't act foolish, while I proceed to tie up the boys more thoroughly, giving them directions while I do so——"

That ever ready gun was peeping from the Hawk's waistband and Russ was as helpless as a baby. He found himself struggling against his bonds until the wire bit into his skin cruelly. Then, as though he had seen a great light, his foreboding was forgotten in a rush of thrilled anticipation. Suddenly a trip to the Hawk's nest seemed to be the most delightful prospect he had ever faced. Somewhere, somehow, in the midst of his enemies, he might conquer. Every drop of blood in him was afire and his freckled face was shining with the delight only a gamble with disaster could arouse within him.

The Hawk was tying Williams' ankles expertly as he said calmly, "Blackie, you can be the messenger boy. One hundred thousand dollars dropped in cash on the little dry lake in the middle of the deserted stretch between Qualega and Santa Carlotta and your pal here will go released. It may not be right away. That stretch will be flown over by me myself in person every once in so often, and when I find a little bag in the middle of it, I'll land and get it. As you are doubtless aware, it would be pretty hard to get a bunch

of men to capture me in that desert, and I know it so well that there's no chance whatever of concealing anybody on the ground to pot me when I land. You do a little collecting around Tampico and the United States, or wherever it's necessary, and within a few hours thereafter Lieutenant Farrell will be on his way home."

The outlaw was talking with that curiously stagy attitude that showed plainly the delight he was taking in being a superman straight out of the pages of some book. That he reveled in his fame and in the thousand legends that had grown up around him was as obvious to Russ as the fact that in his daring and audacity he *was* almost superhuman. He moved over to the sullen Richards and started to truss up the oil man.

"If the ransom should not be paid," he went on lightly, "it would be a very awkward situation. I should be forced to leave the collection of it in the hands of some of my men, and they would doubtless get impatient if it took too long. That would probably be very unfortunate for the lieutenant. However, under the circumstances of Russ's being an army officer, and having been hired by companies worth tens of millions of dollars, I do not anticipate that they will have any desire to have the papers of the world print a

story to the effect that they have refused to rescue one of their most famous employees. Now, if you're ready, Lieutenant, we'll proceed."

Farrell's blazing eyes shifted to Williams. The sardonic Texan's lips were twisted into a snarl and his black eyes were stormy as he wriggled helplessly in his bonds. Russ went over to him quickly. "This looks like a break for us," he said huskily. "Don't worry——"

"Man, if I could only get loose! Gun or no gun——"

"Don't be silly," Russ told him. "And listen, old-timer, it doesn't mean much now, I suppose, but I'm sorry about this morning——"

"Forget it," snapped Blackie. "I'll never forget it, of course, but I can't blame you. And we'll get that grinning devil as sure as you're a foot high!"

"Are the fond farewells all said?" inquired the Hawk suavely. "Good-by, Blackie, and don't spare the horses in raising that money, eh, what? You shouldn't have any trouble when you tell them that the mere matter of a hundred thousand dollars will get rid of me, should you, and that if they don't pay it, I'll get two hundred thousand from them anyway? You might also tell them that it was cussed nice of them to put their money in Rebrache where I could get it, and I hope that

they leave it here for a while if they don't come through with the ransom. Give 'em all my love, and tell them this hurts me worse than it does them. Come on, Russ——"

He stopped abruptly and stared down into the valley. Then:

"A bit of an army seems to be coming along the Rebrache road," he said quickly. "That noted general, Sancho Perana, and his merry men. Having no liking for the general, we'll depart even more speedily. Come on, Farrell, snap it up!"

The next second Russ was striding swiftly down the slope alongside his companion. The outlaw turned to him and his white teeth gleamed below his mask as he said, "Ever since I heard you were coming down here, I've thought we ought to know each other better."

"We will," Russ promised him, with a grin that seemed to partake of the spirit of his captor. "I'm going to get you yet, big boy, and don't you doubt that!"

"Good!" laughed the Hawk mockingly, "and may the best man win!"

CHAPTER IX

THEY took a circuitous route through the monte and although they were never within a hundred yards of a human being, and despite the fact that every living soul at the station had no time for thinking about anything but the mortal struggle in which they were engaged, the bandit nevertheless was as watchful as a fox. He kept Russ slightly ahead of him and warned him not to talk. Fortunately for his plans, or as Russ reflected more probably his plans were based on that very fact, the clearing that was used as a landing field was at the north edge of the station and a considerable distance from any well.

Busy as he was with thoughts of what the future might hold for him, Russ nevertheless strove to catch glimpses of what was happening between the small army of Mexicans and the Rebrache men. He did not entirely agree with Blackie Williams' judgment that everything the Hawk had said was a bluff to scare the three musketeers of the air away from their job. Somehow it did not seem improbable to him that in this

strange comic-opera land there should be widespread intrigue and seethings beneath the surface that would require a far more experienced and mature intelligence than his own to comprehend.

As they approached the field, however, his thoughts centered on himself and his captor. His mind was like an animal in a cage dodging here and there, striving to find some avenue of escape. He did not bother to wonder whether the Hawk was Arch Avery, nor did the possibility occur to him that perhaps his companion was not really the Hawk at all. To Russ the bandit was the unanswerable solution to the whole huge problem he had been asked to help solve.

His thoughts roved back briefly to that conversation with the oil bosses, and the huge White's impressive statement concerning the possibility of international complications all hinging on that laughing devil behind him.

A slight rustle in the bushes at the edge of the field made the young flyer draw back quickly. His elbow touched the Hawk. The next second they were proceeding on their way, but Russ was thinking, "Gosh, how he's built!" Somehow he had gotten the impression of flesh at once as hard as a rock and yet curiously alive, as though every atom of his body were glowing with vitality.

There was something supple and resilient in the mere touch of it.

"Well, here we are," the bandit said calmly. "Let me have a look at this other ship first to make sure that it can't take off."

The two Bullets were drawn up at the edge of the field. Not a soul was about. A brief examination told the story. The radiator of the ship Russ and Delroy had been flying was veritably a sieve and as dry as a bone.

Blackie's ship was all right, except that its gas tank was only half full.

"That's full enough," the Hawk said confidently. "We won't have to bother with any fuel. It'll take me to a place where I can get plenty. Now, Lieutenant, with your permission, I'll put you in the front seat where I can keep an eye on you."

They approached the cockpit and the bandit helped Russ in.

"Now that was nice of Blackie," he chuckled to himself, "to leave a perfectly good parachute in the cockpit and I think I'll use it myself. Kind of a dirty trick to play on you, but you might have a temptation to leave me suddenly if you had one on."

"It's going to be dog-goned uncomfortable for

me with my hands behind my back," Russ protested as he sat down.

"Right you are," agreed the outlaw. "I'll tie 'em in front of you. Now, no false moves, Lieutenant, because this is no time to fool."

As he was loosening the wire and then rebinding Farrell's wrists in front of him, the beginning of a plan was seething in Russ's white-hot mind. It was hard to remember that he was utterly alone, for far-away shouts of the struggling men, the roar of the fire, and the wells made it seem as though he were in the midst of gigantic activity. But he was alone, and unless someone showed up in a few seconds he would be in the air, beyond all help. It was on the certainty of this that his plans were made, and as the scheme took shape in his mind his freckled face whitened with anticipation and his jaw seemed to set more firmly.

He watched the Hawk put on his seat-pack parachute and then lift the tail around until the ship was in a position to take off. He relaxed only when the outlaw was safely ensconced in the rear cockpit. It was but a momentary relaxation, but he knew now for a certainty what he would do.

"Now, Lieutenant," the Hawk boomed at him from the back seat, "I'm going to push this self-

starter. We're going to let the motor warm until it's in shape to take off, or until somebody gets curious."

The next second, the twelve-cylinder engine roared into life. An instant later it was idling along sweetly with a sound that seemed almost inaudible in competition with the ceaseless bellow of the escaping gas from the burning well. Russ glanced at the sky. The crimson smoke cloud covered half the clearing far to the south as a fresh north breeze carried the billows of smoke that way. That would help him.

Now the motor was turning up a thousand revolutions and the Hawk's head was bent over the instrument board in the back seat. For just a few seconds, then, it bellowed along wide open as the outlaw tried it out. Russ was surprised when he did not climb out to remove the wheel blocks that had been placed in such a way as to hold the ship with more firmness than they would give in their proper position. The Hawk simply opened the motor wide for a moment, then threw the air blast against the elevator and got the tail up by pushing the stick forward although the ship was not moving. He jerked back on the stick and the Bullet leaped the blocks and hurled itself across the somewhat rolling ground. A moment

later, the motor singing its mighty song of power as the throttle remained all the way ahead, it was in the air.

It did not take Russ long to realize that he was riding with a real pilot. Without slip or skid the bandit brought the ship up in a chandelle and was headed squarely back across the pumping station. It was the grandstander in him coming to the surface again. As he roared across three hundred astonished men, he had his head over the side of the cockpit so that all could see his mask, and waved to his stupefied audience blithely.

"I'll bet they're knocked dead," Russ thought, his heart pounding like mad. "That's the way he gets his reputation—appearing out of thin air like this under the most unexpected conditions."

Desperate as his own situation was, he nevertheless grinned a wide grin as he thought of what must be passing through the minds of the men on the ground below them. To-night of all nights, this of all places, and this time of all times for the most famous outlaw in Mexico to appear in a stolen ship squarely over three hundred of his enemies!

But the Hawk didn't waste much time or gasoline to show off. He flew northward again until he was out of the smoke and then sent the Bullet

into a steep climb. Russ watched the altimeter steadily and his head drooped against the cockpit on the right-hand side. He was simulating weakness, as though the physical effort he had made coupled with his weakened condition had worn him out. As a matter of fact he *was* feeling just a trifle groggy but he was in possession of all his faculties. He would have hated to have had a hand-to-hand fight, however, at that moment.

At three thousand feet they were about five miles north of the pumping station and just turning westward over a limitless jungle. Russ was now slumped weakly against the side, his eyes closed, and the personification of utter fatigue. He felt a hand on his shoulder. The Hawk cut the gun and yelled to him, "What's the matter? All in?"

Russ, his eyes only half open underneath his goggles, nodded weakly, and then closed his eyes again. Without further comment, the Hawk turned on the motor again and leveled off the ship.

Russ was wearing no helmet because his head was so thoroughly bandaged that he needed none, but he did have on goggles. For a moment he remained resting against the cowling at his right. Then, as though he had fainted, he slumped for-

ward. The blood was pounding through his veins now and his body was far from relaxed. Every nerve was jumping. His hands fumbled with his belt and the next second he had pitched forward on the floor of the cockpit against the stick. Would the Hawk suspect something because his belt had come undone? He lay against the stick that the weight of his body had pressed forward, his head twisted back so that he could see toward the rear of the ship. Apparently he had lost consciousness.

The Bullet was diving, now, and the wires were commencing to shrill with the speed. The roar of the motor died and the next second he saw that masked face appear over the cowling between the two cockpits. A moment later the bandit had unfastened his own belt and was standing up, leaning over. The Bullet was diving terrifically now and Russ realized that they had only three thousand feet of altitude to start with. He could almost see the ground rushing up to meet them. His teeth clenched and the thought of the prize that might be in his grasp was strong enough to keep him steady, though he realized he was rushing to certain destruction if his enemy did not move.

The Hawk *was* suspicious. His eyes were

dancing behind his dark glasses and his gun was in his left hand as he reached over with his right to drag Russ away from the stick. His own controls were useless, of course, so long as Russ's body was interfering with the stick in the front seat. Russ gathered himself. He could not get the gun under any circumstances but there was another expediency——

The Hawk was dragging his limp body up on the seat now. The gun was in the bandit's left hand, resting on the cowling. Russ could feel the strength in that burly body as one arm handled with ease his one hundred and seventy pounds of limp weight.

Then Russ struck. His wired hands darted like the strike of a rattler toward the big metal rip-cord ring on the outlaw's chest. In a split second he had jerked it. His hands flew toward the gun as the bandit started to use it at Farrell's first move. He saw the pilot's chute spring out and a second later the Hawk was whisked from the ship as the big silk umbrella was caught in the terrific air stream. There was a thud that shook the ship from nose to tail as his body hit the vertical fin. The next second Russ was bolt upright, the stick between his knees as his bound

hands awkwardly fastened his belt around him. An exultant laugh that he could not hear himself came from his lips as he turned the motor on again and circled widely around the parachute with its precious burden.

He didn't want to get too close for fear the Hawk still had his gun. Something, however, in that limp body drew him irresistibly closer until he was sending the Bullet around his victim in a vertical bank that caused it to describe a circle only a few yards in diameter.

"Knocked him unconscious when he hit the tail, as sure as you're alive!" he thought happily. "I hope he don't get killed when he hits."

That made it easier. He had figured that he could rush back to the field and that there would be horses enough to allow a force of men to surround and capture the helpless bandit within an hour or two. If he was unconscious, or hurt—and that he would be hurt if he landed unconscious in that jungle was inevitable—his capture was a certainty.

Russ, his eyes burning, took his bearings quickly. Then he sent the ship southward in a terrific power dive toward the flaming pumping station. He was only eight miles away and in

three minutes he was skirting that cloud of smoke and thinking, "That field isn't lit up very well. I hope I make it without cracking up."

As he came squarely over the station his eyes concentrated on a tableau alongside of the big shed that shielded the battery of pumps. It seemed as though the two hundred sombreroed horsemen who had just arrived as he and the Hawk had been leaving had no interest whatever in the fire. If Perana and his men were paid by the oil companies, that seemed peculiar. As he circled over the scene there seemed to be other things that did not look right.

For a moment the gathering of men looked up at him as though very much frightened. Well they might be, Russ thought, if they figured that the Hawk was back. But why should all fire-fighting have ceased, and why should the regular force of the pumping station—easily picked out because they were all on foot—and the Mexicans all on horseback, be gathered in the center of a huge circle of Perana's men? And why should the apparent leader of the Mexican band—easily distinguishable by his gaudy attire—be holding a gun against the chest of a tall, gangling American whose stoop-shouldered body, even from a height of two hundred feet, was easily recognized

by Russ from the descriptions of Blackie and Delroy—Salty Bexar, the young superintendent of the oil station?

Russ's mind was in a turmoil. There could be but one explanation it seemed to him. Whether or not the Mexican army was the force of Sancho Perana one thing seemed evident—that the Mexicans were after something. Perhaps the money that had been sought for by the flyers that afternoon!

"Perhaps Perana, when he got wind of such a big haul, turned traitor to his bosses," Russ thought swiftly. Or had he turned traitor? Perhaps he was under order from his bosses. Once again all that the Hawk had said came back to him, and it seemed that the tableau on the ground held implications so vast that it made the young flyer feel as though he were at the moment a lone contestant fighting all the rest of the world. Suddenly he had an admiration too deep for words for the dauntless little band of pioneers like Richards, fighting the almost insuperable difficulties that seemed to be connected with getting oil from Mexico.

Suppose Perana and his men should simply allow the fires to rage unchecked until such time as Salty or someone told him where the money

was hidden? Far more than a few hundred thousand dollars would be lost if that whole station got on fire, and it would, surely, if it was not fought to the last ditch. Already a tongue of flame was reaching hungrily in the direction of another one of the huge lakes of oil that surrounded the station and it would not be long before a million barrels of oil were ablaze.

Those Mexicans were holding the Americans by force. There could be no other explanation of it. There was nothing Russ could do—there was not a bit of ammunition in his ship. If there had been, he wouldn't have dared to have used it. He didn't know surely enough what was going on down there.

Then, out of a clear sky, a plan formed in his mind. If that fire in the air were put out, hundreds of thousands of dollars would be saved. In addition to that, perhaps the situation between the Mexicans and the Americans would be changed. It was literally the first time that Russ had thought of it but it was the truth that he and Blackie and Delroy had been innocently responsible for that furnace of fire. To the impulsive red-head his job, any job, automatically generated within him a loyalty that took no stock of halfway measures. In the miraculously clear

mental condition that was his, it seemed that every possibility involved came to him with effortless ease.

That fire must be put out first of all, if it could be done, and Richards' few words and his bird's-eye view of the situation combined to create in his mind what seemed to him a simple and totally obvious way to do it. If the tank fire were out, the smaller fires could be controlled and even that sump could be hedged in as a forest fire would be.

Low as he was and to one side of the burning well, he could see plainly all the factors that combined to make the blaze a certain destroyer of the entire station were it not controlled. So long as a huge conflagration was burning in the sky, just so long would destruction on the ground be a certainty. Due to the tremendous gas pressure, no oil was visible at the uncontrolled mouth of the well—it was blown upward in drops and not in a solid column. Twenty feet or so in the air the expanding gas ignited and the burning gas consumed the oil. The heat was so terrific that men could not work within hundreds of yards of it. He could see how a momentary vacuum that would cut that outpouring of gas might cause the fire in the air to be snuffed out as though it were a candle. The unburned oil would drop in a red-

hot shower, of course, but there was no one he could see who would be in danger from it.

It would take only a minute and conditions on the ground were such that pursuit of the Hawk might not be a possibility for a while anyway. In the back of his head there was instinctive feeling that perhaps what he contemplated doing would mean more to the men for whom he was fighting than anything else could possibly mean right then.

All fear apparently had been burned from him during that day and his feeling of exultant well-being in his halfway capture of the Hawk, plus the fatalistic attitude that was the result of the hundred mysteries that seemed to impregnate the very atmosphere over the oil fields, turned him into an automaton of transcendent efficiency.

He was circling far back of the pumping station now, still being watched warily by the men on the ground. They were continuing their own struggles, apparently—perhaps Perana did not know where the money was hidden. Now he was a half mile back of the pillar of fire and smoke and five hundred feet high. He took a moment to get a thousand feet, coming close to the burning well as he did so. Then, white-faced, but with his mind and heart temporarily filled with noth-

ing but pure recklessness and fierce joy in what he was about to dare, he patted the shining ship as though it were a human being.

"We'll see what you're made of now," he whispered, and with motor full on pushed the stick all the way forward.

CHAPTER X

THE next second he was diving like a comet almost straight down on the fringe of smoke. At three hundred feet the air speed needle was tight against the peg and the Bullet was a leaping, quivering thing, rushing madly toward the earth. Now he was flashing past the smoke, five hundred feet back from the well. He started to pull level, both hands on the stick and tugging at it with almost all of his strength. His skill did not desert him. Three hundred feet from the mouth of the well he was level above the ground, and only five feet above it. He was darting toward the mouth of the well at more than three hundred miles an hour. If a cannon ball could cut off the fire, so could a ship.

The next instant the Bullet had flashed squarely across the column of gas. He felt himself hurled upward in its grip during that split second and the next moment he was fighting desperately in a cloud of strangling vapor. Then he was out of it, as he automatically threw the ship toward the light. He remembered to throw his arms in front

of his face. A thousand red-hot needles seemed to be pricking him, but only for a second. Then he was far to the north, where the breeze kept the air free from even a trace of smoke. Pain from dozens of burns racked him but as he looked round, afraid of what he might see, he loosed a triumphant cry. The sky was still a mass of smoke but there was no red in it.

Three minutes later he had landed safely. His burns—of minor importance alongside matters that were churning in his mind—were forgotten. He had his plans fully outlined by the time he had landed, and the fact that there was not a soul at the clearing when he came down made them seem more important than ever and the suspicions that he had had in the air more probable. He snapped off the switches, leaped to the ground and the next second was plunging through the chaparral toward the spot where Richards and Blackie were doubtless still lying, helplessly bound.

It took five minutes to reach the spot, but they were there. As he awkwardly unbound Blackie with his own almost useless hands, he told his story swiftly. Williams listened silently and then untied Russ and Richards. His dark face, however, was shining with the old look, and the lean

Texan was on fire as he had not been since Russ had arrived in Mexico. He was the old devil-may-care Blackie Williams—all personal troubles forgotten and nothing but the joy of the job ahead of him.

Richards, too, was a new man. "I never have trusted that Perana hombre," he said quickly. "He's just been working a blackmail gag on the oil companies from the start because he had more men. He's after that money——"

"Now listen," Russ interrupted, the words coming in a torrent of speech. "Here's what I thought. Blackie, you take the ship and run off and see if you can spot this Hawk guy. We haven't any time to go down after more ammunition, and we'd probably be held up. Maybe we'll be, anyway. But anyhow you can't miss him on account of the parachute being so white at night. Then Richards here and I will go over and see what's up. You'll be up in the air. We'll tell Perana if he's up to anything, that you're going to fly to Tampico and get the Oil Field Flyers' ships and pot his dog-goned army right to smithereens. With you in the air, he'll be helpless, see? You can fly back and take a look at what's happening after you spot that thug, and if it don't look right, you can do just what we said

you'd do. I think we can scare Mr. Perana if he's up to anything."

"And if he is up to anything, he's probably got backing," Williams said calmly. "Unless he intends to light out for far places. Dog-goned if this Hawk wasn't right. That voice of his sounded familiar somehow to me, incidentally——"

"Did you ever know this Avery?" Russ broke in.

"Just slightly. He was about this bird's size, and he had black hair, but I can't swear to it. Well, I'm on my way."

He pushed down toward the field while Russ and Richards plunged down the slope toward the bunk houses.

"Some stunt, Farrell, putting out that fire," Richards said breathlessly. "We can get by with only one sump gone now, maybe. So Perana had the boys rounded up, did he?"

Russ nodded. He had no breath left to talk.

The center of the pumping station was several hundred yards from the bunk houses, lower in the valley, and screened from them by a row of storage tanks and occasional clumps of uncut mesquite.

"Get in this tool pusher," Richards gasped and Russ climbed into a small car on the back

of which was a wooden platform for the transportation of tools. Richards sent it careening over the rough road at a dizzy pace, but as they dipped over the brow of the hill he slowed down.

The scene had not changed except that the cordon around the Americans seemed looser and four men were riding at a gallop toward the landing field. Just at that moment, however, the roar of Blackie's motor came dimly to Russ's ears and he nodded with satisfaction.

"Blackie's off!" he said excitedly. "What do you suppose we're walking into, Richards?"

The chunky ex-Ranger's lips twisted below his dapper mustache. "Search me," he said, and suddenly he grinned. "But we'll soon find out."

As they got out of the car fifty yards from the mass of men, it seemed that all proceedings stopped and three hundred pairs of eyes were on them as they approached.

"What's up, Salty?" Richards shouted from twenty yards away. "That's Perana, all right, the big fellow," he said in lower tones to Russ.

"Come and find out," came a high pitched answer.

Russ's eyes were on the Mexican chief as they walked through the sombreroed Mexicans. General Sancho Perana was on the ground and he

bulked almost a head higher than any other man in his vicinity. He must have weighed two hundred pounds, and his sombrero, garnished with an elaborate silver and leather band, was in keeping with his gaze. His riding breeches were black with an orange band of silver down each side, and huge spurs gleamed on his embossed boots. A gaudy red neckerchief was around his neck, and above it a fat dark face with long black mustaches was set with small and beady black eyes. His hair was thick and coarse and black as night. There was a certain surface geniality in his face, but Russ did not have to seek far to find utter cruelty beneath.

Alongside of him was Salty Bexar, tall and thin, blond and stooped. His face was sharp featured and his eyes mild and blue. A very deceiving young man, if what Russ had heard was true.

"Are you the one that put out the fire with your funny airplane?" he asked, smiling slightly. He was chewing a straw as though he had not a trouble in the world.

"I am," grinned Russ.

The Mexicans were looking at him with what amounted to awe in their faces and General Perana's beady eyes were very bright.

"You go with the Hawk and come back alone,"

he said in stilted English, his fat jowl wide in a toothy smile. "What 'appen?"

"Was that the Hawk, no kidding?" a gaunt, oil-grimed American asked from the rear. The speaker was a middle-aged grim-looking man called "Hub" who ranked close to Bexar at the station. A fighter, if ever there was one.

"It was," Russ said. "And I got a chance to dump him out of the ship in his parachute. He was going to kidnap me as well as steal the ship. What we've got to do right now is to hustle out in the monte about ten miles and get him."

There was a moment of silence. The Mexican talked in low liquid tones, and suddenly tense excitement seemed to run over the group.

"Who is flying now?" demanded Perana.

"Blackie Williams," Richards told him, and there was savage contempt in his voice and eyes as he looked at the gross Mexican. "Furthermore, if there is any funny stuff around here, he's going to fly to Tampico and bring three ships down with plenty of machine guns aboard. Sabe that, General?"

Suddenly Salty Bexar's blue eyes were glinting with a very cool light. "How did you figure on anything like that?" he asked swiftly.

Richards was apparently a very forthright

young man. His round face was very hard as he said, throwing the words fairly into Perana's face, "We didn't like the looks of a bunch of Mexicans surrounding you boys. What's up, Perana?"

The big Mexican's face was a study. His eyes stared around at his followers and suddenly in the glare of the fire Russ had the feeling that his men were like a pack of wolves. Their teeth gleamed below the shadows cast by their big straw sombreros like a hundred exposed fangs.

"We come with the order to move the money to a safer place," he said swiftly, "and Señor Bexar, he will not say where it is. He——"

"Whose orders?" snapped Russ.

The general looked at him with what seemed like mingled fear and hate. The army pilot did not like the looks of General Sancho Perana and there was no dissembling in his nature.

"From Tampico," the Mexican said vaguely. "Señor White, he——"

"Dog-goned funny that he didn't telephone. I believe I mentioned that before," Bexar slid in swiftly. His stoop-shouldered body, thin as a lath, was leaning negligently against the saddle of Perana's horse. He seemed almost bored and tired of the whole thing. "I'll tell you, Richards,

we wouldn't tell him where the money was buried, and he was about to get very nasty."

There was a moment of silence as though things were at an impasse. The general was fingering the handle of his machete, which hung in its scabbard on his saddle. Two pearl-handled guns in holsters were strapped down to his legs, and crossed ammunition belts glistened on his chest.

"Armed to the teeth," Russ felt was an expression that might have originated for Sancho. It seemed plain to him that Perana did not know what to do. That there had been no order for him to remove the money seemed plain as day, but that he did not quite know whether to dare strong-arm methods to get its location now that Russ and Blackie and an airplane had been injected into the situation, was quite clear. It took but one look at his face to realize that he and his followers would have been delighted to get the information they sought by their own peculiar methods, were they not frightened by airplane pursuit.

"Señor Bexar," Perana said at length, and his speech was so silky and sweet as to be more deadly than harshness would have been, "I tell you I

have the order. They did not know in Tampico that you had already moved the money from its first hiding place. They do not know where it is now. I have my order. I must obey."

Suddenly it seemed that an inspiration came to Russ. A fortune was in Perana's grasp and he knew it. Along with that conviction Russ had another one. If Perana had known where the money was originally—it had been news to Russ himself that it had been moved, just as the mere fact that there was a store of treasure at Rebrache had been—the suspicion of collusion between the Mexican super-policeman and some higher-up seemed logical.

"Now you listen to me, General," he found himself saying. He took a step or two toward the bulking leader until their faces were very close together. After all, Perana knew Salty and Richards and the rest well, and knew them as mere field men for the huge interests represented in Tampico. If Perana were dealing with higher-ups, the mere superintendent of one isolated little camp might not mean much to him. "Do you know who I am?"

"You are Lieutenant Farrell, no?"

Perana's opaque little eyes held no hint of

expression as they rested steadily on the blazing blue ones that were almost on a level with his own.

"I am, and I'm fresh from Tampico and the personal representative—on leave from the American army—of the general board of all the oil companies, and what I say, goes. Whatever orders you may have received are superseded now. If you touch that money or do anything except help us right now to get this Hawk, you and your men will be shot up as thieves within two hours from now. You may have your orders. I'm not disputing that, but you've got different orders now, understand?"

Somehow in the circumstances Russ felt that diplomacy would be wasted. He was bluffing magnificently and to let down would be fatal. "Now, listen, General," he said, after a second's taut silence. "I know of you well. Your fame has gone far outside of Mexico, and to you shall go the credit for catching the Hawk——"

He stopped there to let the suggestion sink in. The Mexican's fat face did not change. For a long moment he looked the stalwart pilot up and down as though wondering what to do. Then a scarred-faced Mexican behind him turned and said a few rapid words in Spanish to the men

back of him. Whispers spread around the group and the looks that were cast at the tense young flyer were far from friendly. But there was indecision and fear in them, too. An oath dropped from Perana's lips like a hot coal. Instinctively Russ knew he had won. Whatever Perana had in mind, he was too uncertain to carry it out then.

"We shall see what we shall see," he muttered. "Now we get the Hawk, eh, and we shall talk later." Suddenly his voice rose in a stream of Spanish to his men.

Russ heard Richards' voice talking into his ear.

"Good boy, Russ, good boy," he was saying. "You got away with it. He's telling his men that there will be a big reward for capturing the Hawk. I——"

His whispered words were drowned out by the clatter of voices and the noise of Perana's army getting under way.

"Can't we get some horses or something and go with them?" Russ shouted.

Richards nodded. "There are half a dozen over here that belong to us," he yelled. "Come on, Salty and Hub. Let's go!"

Russ stopped for a second to explain to Perana the exact location where the Hawk had fallen

and a moment later the motley crew was riding like mad across the clearing. The general dashed ahead, a melodramatic figure, hitting his horse with the flat of his machete. It seemed that he wanted to beat the Americans to it for the glory involved.

"He isn't through with us yet," Salty told Russ breathlessly as they ran together for the horses. "But maybe this will keep him busy all night anyway."

The horses were a quarter of a mile away. In jig time the group of Americans reached them, mounted and rode hard for the monte. The oil men followed a road in the jungle for three miles. Then the road became a rough trail and finally just a *brèche* that was simply a path cut out by Mexican machetes through the heart of the monte. When they reached the mouth of it they stopped for a council of war.

"Listen, Salty," Russ said. "If this guy's hurt, it's sure we don't stand a chance of getting him. Perana and his men will have him. If he wasn't hurt, then probably instead of going into the heart of the monte, he'd double back. He's got to have food, and he'd rather take a chance on getting away that way——"

"Sounds reasonable," Richards agreed. "Pe-

rana and his men can slip through this jungle in ways and at a speed that you wouldn't believe. They know every tree in it. He's got this guy's retreat into the heart of the monte cut off by now, I'll bet a million dollars. Blackie up there doesn't seem to be doing anything but searching, either. I don't believe that he's spotted the boy yet."

It was true. Blackie was flying low above the jungle, sometimes so far away that his motor was barely heard and other times close by.

"Which means," Russ stated, "that he came to or something, folded up his parachute and got it out of sight."

"What we ought to do," the lantern-jawed, forty-year-old man known as Hub said, "is picket every *brèche* and road leading out from where you dropped him, and not go rambling through the jungle half cocked. Perana's boys have got him surrounded, I'll bet, by now."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Russ agreed.

For a moment the four men sat their horses, quietly thinking it over. From the thick jungle all about them a thousand noises of the night reached their ears. There were rustles and whispers, and once a loud crack which made them jump. The moon was riding high in the sky now and the red glow from the pumping station

seemed to be less brilliant. The walls of the *brèche* seemed to be solid in the darkness and the thought of any human being making its way through them seemed unbelievable. Russ was far from timid, but as he thought of the life that inhabited this primeval monte, the idea of battling his way through it was not attractive.

"Well," Salty said finally, "it seems to me, then, that we'd better——"

"Listen!" Russ's voice had a quality in it that seemed to make it fairly hang in the air as the word snapped out.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" Richards whispered to himself.

The voice of an unseen person reached their ears. The man was singing and Russ knew the tune. Suddenly, like statues, all the men listened. But that haunting refrain was known, apparently, to Russ alone. It was getting closer now and the words could be made out.

"Ah's done got converted, and Ah's doin' my bes'
So de Lord will bless mah las' long res'—
Pharaoh's army got drownded.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep."

That baritone voice singing that refrain of haunting melancholy in the darkness seemed to

turn the oil men to stone. The man was barely around the turn now and the voice raised and lowered as blithely as though the unseen warbler had been walking down the path to his own house back in the States.

"Oh, Mary, don' you weep, don' you moan,
Oh, Mary, don' you weep, don' you moan—
Pharaoh's army got drownded.
Oh, Mary, don' you weep."

Russ could not even think. They were out after the Hawk. Was this singer——? His face was hot and his heart was pounding. A dim shape outlined itself around the bend in the *brèche* and for a second the lone man stopped. Then the flashlight in Bexar's hand bathed him in its light. Slim and blond and smiling, dressed in the torn flying coveralls in which Russ had last seen him that afternoon, was Duke Delroy, grinning gaily.

"Hello, boys," he said, and strolled toward them nonchalantly.

CHAPTER XI

"DUKE, what are you doing here?"

It was Salty Bexar's soft voice, but somehow that question was like a whip lash. The lanky, competent young man's eyes flashed from Delroy toward Russ, an unspoken question in them.

"Well, boys and girls," the Duke returned blithely, "you have some grounds for astonishment, I'll admit."

The middle-aged, mahogany-faced man whom Russ knew as Hub—the man second in command to Bexar at the pumping station—was pulling at his sun-bleached mustache. He was chewing tobacco with quick, nervous movements of his jaw and it seemed as if he could hold himself in no longer.

"Farrell, what did that there Hawk look like?"

Delroy threw back his head and his laugh resounded through the night. "Don't tell me the Hawk's been around here!" he gasped.

"Yes, he's been round here," Hub told Delroy levelly, "and in fact he's not more than three miles

away from us this minute, somewhere out there in the monte."

"That was the Hawk who was dropped out of that airplane?" Delroy demanded, his handsome face radiant with delighted interest. "Was it Blackie who dropped him out?"

"No, I did," Russ told him.

"What happened?"

"Before we go into that," Salty Bexar said, his voice trembling slightly, "just tell us—how do you happen to be around here?"

The four oil men crowded up to the Duke unobtrusively till they fairly surrounded him, and Bexar's sharp countenance was very close to Delroy's as he leaned in his saddle to ask that question.

"Nothing simpler, my boy, nothing simpler," Delroy said gaily. "About ten miles out Charlie and I had a puncture. Soon as we got that fixed and started again we had another one and no spare tire. We finally left the car at the side of the road and started back for the station to get a new tire, and as we were trundling along the road, sore as blazes, we saw a ship take off, and that interested me strangely. Then I saw a parachute drop—I was just about opposite the spot where you dumped him, Russ—and I went plunging into

the monte to get the bird, whoever he was. I figured he'd surely be hurt. I thought I knew where he'd fallen, and I made a bee line for the place, keeping my eye on a star, but I couldn't locate him. Probably he'd disappeared. Or else I didn't hit the exact place, but if that 'chute had been hanging on to any trees, I'd have seen it, that's a cinch."

Russ felt himself relax even further, and Salty Bexar drew a deep breath. "Where's Charlie?" he demanded, and there was not so much menace in his voice.

"Charlie had blisters all over his feet and he went staggering on to camp. He said with emphasis and considerable heat that the way he felt he didn't care who was out in the monte. He had no curiosity about it."

"Listen, Bexar," Russ interrupted, "I know what you're all thinking about, and I did, too, at first. You think the Duke here is the Hawk. Well, he isn't. The Hawk is a couple of inches taller, weighs fifty or sixty pounds more, has black hair and a gold filling in his front tooth. So that's that."

In a second, the oil men's bodies seemed to slump and they dropped away from Delroy. The Duke treated himself to another laugh.

"I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted," he chuckled. "But I'm mighty glad I'm not too close a double for this egg. What's up now? What are you out here for—doing a little searching?"

"Sancho Perana and about two hundred men are beating the monte for the bird," Bexar told him. "It's a wonder you didn't run into some of them."

"Dog-goned lucky I didn't, I guess," Delroy remarked. "Come on, tell me everything. What happened, and how did that fire happen to go out all of a sudden?"

They told him the story briefly. Every few seconds, distant shouts and the crackle of bushes indicated that Perana's men were hard at work. The airplane piloted by Blackie Williams flew across them on its way to the landing field. Evidently Blackie had given up hope of spotting the elusive outlaw.

"And so," Russ concluded, "we don't know exactly where we stand except that we're sure of getting the Hawk. If he landed in this monte without hurting himself, and he evidently did, it's just a plain miracle. But hurt or not, there isn't any way that a man on foot with only a half

hour's start can escape from two hundred horsemen, is there?"

"Not a chance in the world," Hub said emphatically. "This gang of Sancho's knows every foot of the jungle. They're spread out right now, farther away than he could possibly get, and will be driving him this way."

"He can't make two miles an hour through the monte around here," Delroy agreed. "Perana'll certainly be on his mettle, too. That fifty thousand dollar reward, alive or dead, will look sweet to him——"

"And the glory'll look a lot sweeter," Bexar said disgustedly.

"He was going to move the money to a safer place, was he?" Delroy grinned. "Now, if that isn't a pretty story! I suppose White and Ransome would trust a doubtful bird like Perana with a half million!"

"You might try to explain one thing to me," Bexar said gently. "I'd like to know how Mr. Perana knew where the money originally was hidden."

"Oh, he knew that, did he?" Delroy inquired oratorically. "The soup commences to thicken! How about those flyers? Did they know, too?"

"They did," Hub growled. "It was only the

sight of your ships in the air that saved that dinero. That's when we switched it."

"I see," the Duke said thoughtfully, and suddenly his eyes were shining. "Russ, you said that the Hawk suggested that he wasn't the only outlaw operating around these parts, didn't you, and that he said those ships we disabled weren't his?"

"Yes," Russ told him, "and furthermore I'm convinced right now of what's up."

"Yeah? What's on your mind?" Bexar inquired wearily.

"I'll tell you," Russ blazed. "There's a lot of dirty work floating around these fields that originates right at headquarters. It looks to me as if there were a couple of big bugs around Tampico doing a little robbing of their own companies, one working on the ground through Perana, and the other one with a fleet of ships. Whether the Hawk is in with either crowd, or whether he's playing a lone hand, the fact remains that a renegade Mexican bandit leader and a bunch of strange flyers wouldn't know where that money was hidden unless somebody very high up was in cahoots with them. How many men knew the money for the pay rolls was here?"

"I can answer that quickly," Bexar drawled. "Up to the time that ship landed, Richards, Hub

here and I were the only ones who knew it. The truck that carried it down here was driven by a man who thought he was transporting cases of machinery. As a matter of cold fact, the original spot where the money was, was right in a shed. The money boxes were unopened and lying alongside boxed machinery."

"Then this whole business *is* being worked right from headquarters!" Russ exploded, and the little group of men nodded.

"Listen," Bexar said suddenly. "There's no need of our staying around here. Looks to me as if the sump fire had burned out, or pretty close to it, and we can spare some men. Our place is back at the camp, and mine is on the telephone. We'll send out some men to watch the roads when we get back. Don't forget we've still got old man Perana to deal with before long."

Suddenly Russ felt very weary as they wheeled their horses and started back. He felt as though he would fall asleep at any moment. Yet, vaguely troublesome thoughts harried him. He was too tired to think clearly or logically, but he had a sense of foreboding as though something that would hurt him was right around the corner.

"Russ, old-timer," came Delroy's voice, "on

the strength of this afternoon's revelations, I conclude we are wrong in a little of our detectiving to-day."

"Uh huh," mumbled Russ.

"Of course," Delroy pointed out, "if those three ships we wrecked didn't belong to the Hawk there'd be no reason for the Hawk not to fight them as well as us."

"What are you getting at?" Hub inquired.

"Oh, nothing," Russ told him hastily. "We just had an idea that was knocked into a cocked hat this afternoon. Remember this, Duke, we both owe Blackie Williams plenty. We'd have been gone goslings if it hadn't been for him letting that ship pot at him while he saved us."

"Right you are," Delroy agreed.

The conversation about Blackie recalled to Russ something he had almost forgotten in the course of the day. That was Duke Delroy's passing him in a parachute and saving his life. One thing was certain. Never had a man had two such comrades as he had. And yet that feeling of impending disaster would not down. He could not get his teeth in it somehow. He should be feeling vastly contented, he reflected. The Hawk would certainly be captured, the job had been done, and

even the menace of Perana did not seem important now. The bandit had doubtless been scared off anyhow by the threat of airplanes.

The exhausted young flyer's head drooped and he fell sound asleep on his horse. He didn't know until they arrived back at the camp that Delroy had switched horses—Duke had been riding behind Hub, that gentleman having the largest horse in the crowd—and climbed up behind Russ to hold him on. He almost fell off his horse and said wearily, "I've just got to get some sleep."

"You and me both," Delroy agreed.

"Hop to it, boys," Salty Bexar grinned. "You've certainly had a day's work."

"Señor Bexar——"

It was a young Mexican in the door of the tiny office that was next to the bunk house where Russ had slept before.

"Yes, Manuel? What is it?"

"We try to call up as you say, señor, and the telephone does not work. Juan, who come in half hour ago with his pipe, notice on the way that ten miles out the wire, she is cut."

In the tense silence that fell over the group, something electric snapped Russ out of his weariness. The telephone line he knew was a private one.

"I see," Bexar said slowly. "Somebody, probably Perana, doesn't want us to communicate with headquarters!"

The tall, lean form of Blackie Williams, arrayed sketchily in riding breeches and an undershirt, filled the doorway of the bunk house before them.

"If I overheard all this correctly," he drawled, smoothing his tousled black hair, "it means that Mr. Perana is going after his little raid on the treasury in a pretty big way."

He did not notice Delroy, apparently, for the Duke was standing in the rear of the group, behind a horse. Blackie came down the steps and his long, narrow eyes were glinting with the look Russ knew so well.

"The first thing that's got to be done," he went on slowly, "is to get those ships in shape and armed. One of us will hold the fort against Perana, Russ, and the other one can skip to Tampico right now and find out what's what. I hope Perana doesn't bump off the Duke by mistake."

"He won't," laughed Delroy. "Here I am. Charlie told you, eh?"

"Good boy," grinned Blackie. "Didn't run across the Hawk, did you? Well, Perana will. I

couldn't spot anything myself from the air. The parachute had disappeared and the jungle's too thick. I'm glad you're here, young fellow, because I've got a hunch that our troubles aren't over!"

Six hours later the burning morning sun blazed through the screening around the bunk house on five motionless figures. There were only four beds, but Russ and the Duke were curled up side by side on one of them. The others were occupied by Salty Bexar, Blackie Williams and Richards. The roar of Well No. 2 was powerless to disturb the exhausted men.

Perana and his army were still beating the monte but the business of the pumping station was going on as usual. Groups of Mexican and American laborers trooped noisily in to the cook house next door, but not a man in the bunk house stirred.

It had finally been decided that Hub—Hubbard, his full name was—should drive to Tampico rather than take away a ship that might be needed. Russ hadn't stumbled into bed until three in the morning, after he had helped solder the radiator of the crippled ship, draw the two ships by hand down a roadway on which they could take off, and hide them in the monte at one

side of it. They were taking no chances on what Mr. Perana might do when he returned. If he had any sense at all and did plan to make away with the money, the first thing he would do would be to make sure there were no ships in the air.

CHAPTER XII

RUSS didn't realize it, but he had been on Mexican soil only twenty-four hours when he was snapped into wakefulness. Blackie and Delroy opened their eyes at almost the same second. From the air came the unmistakable drone of an airplane motor.

None of the flyers had removed his clothes, and as if motivated by one impulse, each made for the door. Delroy, as clear-eyed and debonair as though he had had a full night's sleep, was first to reach it.

"One of the oil company's ships," he said. "White or Ransome or one of the big bosses, mebbe."

"I hope so," came a voice from Salty Bexar's bed, and that elongated young gentleman also arose.

The bunk house, which was on the top of a slope, commanded a considerable view of the surrounding country and Blackie Williams suddenly pointed to a section of trail that was visible five miles away.

"It looks as though the general were on his way back," he remarked.

"Sure does," agreed Russ excitedly. "He must have the Hawk, don't you think?"

"We'll soon see," laughed Delroy. "If he hasn't, he's the sorest spig in all Mexico this minute. Let's go over and meet the arriving guests, eh?"

All three pilots, accompanied by Bexar, walked over toward the landing field. But Russ, as though his subconscious mind had been working all the time he'd been asleep, came to a sudden decision. His freckled face paled a bit and the blood raced through his veins. He tried to stop himself, but an ungovernable impulse carried him on. Somehow he didn't want to consult Blackie or anyone else.

"Listen, Duke," he said abruptly. "Come back here with me, will you?" He couldn't wait for a more opportune time or place—some inner compulsion speeded him on.

"Sure, Red. What's on your mind?"

They dropped behind the others about twenty-five feet. The plane was circling for a landing, now, nearly a quarter of a mile away.

"Listen, Duke," Russ said slowly, his eyes clouded with trouble. "I'm not forgetting that

you did plenty for me yesterday, and I'm not forgetting how you stuck in the fight yesterday afternoon. But what would you say if I told you that I knew you weren't Duke Delroy at all, but that your real name is Avery, and that you're Arch Avery's brother?"

These words were a combination of bluff, a wild shot in the dark, and an attempt at being tactful. Blackie had said yesterday that Arch Avery did have a brother who had been a flyer. And yet, Russ prayed that he was wrong.

He did not look directly at Delroy. The debonair Duke was unarmed, he knew, and every muscle in Russ's body was tense, waiting for anything from warding off a blow to forestalling any attempt to escape.

"Are you going cuckoo?" Delroy asked him casually.

He stopped and Russ did also. The other three men kept on walking. As Farrell's eyes met the clear gray ones before him, his own wavered unhappily, but he couldn't stop.

"You think I'm the Hawk, do you?" Delroy asked him, and his eyes were sparkling as though he were enjoying the situation to the limit.

"I know what I'm saying, Duke," Russ went on. "And I'm probably wrong, but I've got to

find out. Neither you nor Blackie—nor anyone else—can kick if he's asked to prove himself."

"In other words," Delroy grinned, "when I came strolling out of the monte you got suspicious?"

"Yes," Russ acknowledged. "It sounds queer. This Hawk guy was bigger than you, and yet it could be possible, Duke. I don't know how, but it could be. You could have sent that note in Tampico, and you could have planted the other one in my pocket, and you could have apparently started with your pal for your oil well, put on your disguise and come back deliberately, knowing the lay of the land, to steal a ship as the Hawk would."

"How do you account for the difference in our appearance?" Delroy asked him slowly.

"I can't," Russ admitted.

A tense silence seemed to make the atmosphere heavy. The amazing Delroy was grinning like a Cheshire cat, and yet that didn't ease the underlying tautness that was almost choking the fiery Farrell. Suddenly, Delroy threw back his head and laughed. It was such a genuine ringing burst of mirth that all at once Russ felt like a foolish kid. Then, with a movement that was like a flash of lightning, Delroy's right hand darted to his

left shoulder. His olive drab shirt was open at the neck and in a split second the dazed Farrell saw a gun appear in his hand. But the gun was thrust out butt first.

"Here's my gun, Russ," he said quietly. "Now you can be sure I won't escape."

The dumbfounded Farrell took the gun automatically. "Why—what——" he stammered.

"Sure," Delroy said briefly. "I don't blame you for wondering about me. Furthermore, I could have changed my get-up by having boots that were built up a couple of inches higher and by wearing one of those rubber jackets that can be pumped up to make me look bigger around the body, and I could have easily stuck some false black hair in the helmet. The best disguise, you know, is the one assumed before the crime, not afterward. And I could even have stuck a fake gold filling on my tooth, as far as that goes. Any man can alter his voice."

In these last three words the Duke suddenly dropped his voice. Instead of his resonant baritone, an unstrained bass came from his throat. The stupefied Farrell for a moment thought he was listening to the voice of the Hawk.

"You're certainly taking it hard," Delroy laughed at him. "It's all between friends, Russ,

and I don't blame you a bit. I know, of course, that even if I happen to be Arch Avery's brother you'd have no way of knowing it or suddenly finding it out in the last few hours. I know that you were just making a big bluff to try to get the truth out, and all that sort of thing. There's one thing I'd like to know, though."

"What's that?" Russ returned mechanically.

"How do you account for me trying to kill you in a parachute and then saving your life?"

Suddenly Russ found himself laughing helplessly. "I don't know," he acknowledged.

"Of course," Delroy told him, "the parachute could have failed itself, and I, being a very versatile and resourceful young man, could have leaped on it as an excuse to try to scare the efficient Lieutenant Farrell out of probably becoming my most dangerous foeman."

Russ was still holding the gun pointed at Delroy.

"Now listen, old-timer," the Duke went on gaily. "You keep that gun and we'll go along as we have been until my skirts are clean—officially, I mean. And don't for one minute think that I'm sore. I'd have done the same thing if the situation had been reversed, so let's roll along and forget it."

A great feeling of relief swept over Russ. He was sure now that the Duke was not the Hawk, and suddenly he was equally certain that someone besides a lone outlaw was responsible for the series of crimes around the oil fields. Perhaps even the Hawk was in their pay. In that case, those notes could have been the work of any one of many people without the Hawk himself actually having written them.

They bantered each other as they walked, Delroy ragging Russ unmercifully and Russ retorting that Delroy was a bloodthirsty thug.

As they came closer to the field Delroy said suddenly, "It's none other than Mr. Ransome in our midst, and I don't know who's flying him. It's not one of the boys from the field, but it's one of their ships."

The precise, bespectacled Mr. Ransome walked toward them with Blackie, Salty, and the pilot. The pilot was a short, chunky chap with a pock-marked face and sun-crinkled green eyes. He had a wide pug nose, a bulldog jaw, and a ready-for-anything look.

"Hello, boys," Mr. Ransome said carefully. "This is Mr. Hammond, who was just hired as one of our pilots yesterday. Pardon me while Bexar and I get a few things straightened out."

They walked on ahead, Bexar talking steadily.

"Have you heard the news, Blackie?" Delroy inquired. "Russ has captured the Hawk."

"Huh?" grunted Williams, and Hammond's eyes opened surprisedly.

"Sure," laughed Delroy. "I'm it. He took my gun away from me and everything."

"Oh, shut up," Russ laughed back. "It was just an idea in the back of my noodle, Blackie."

"Well, you've got to admit the famous outlaw gave in without much of a struggle," Delroy went on.

As the Duke described what had happened, Blackie grinned with saturnine enjoyment. For some reason there seemed to have been generated among the three a new camaraderie. Peril and disaster had burned away their superficial masks. Suspicions and misunderstandings had been met and explained. They seemed to forget all their problems momentarily and they ragged each other steadily as they strolled toward the bunk house. Blackie, caustic and mocking, drawled humorous insults concerning the intelligence of the other two. Delroy, laughing and devil-may-care, gave vent to many remarks about the intelligence of United States Army flyers, and Russ pointed out in no uncertain terms that he was the

only one of the three who was a man of sterling character and real worth.

As they reached the office building next to the bunk house, a horseman came riding wildly up the road. Half a mile back, the vanguard of Perana's motley army was in sight. The horseman was General Sancho himself, and Ransome and Bexar paused at the door to await him. The four pilots stood a short distance away. All eyes were bent on the huge Mexican as he dragged his horse to a halt and flung himself off.

"Did you get the Hawk?" Bexar asked him.

"No!" spat Perana.

"What are you all excited about?" Ransome asked him quickly as the irrepressible Delroy whispered, "Another nail in my coffin, eh what, Lieutenant?"

Perana hesitated. His beady black eyes shifted to Ransome's bespectacled gray ones. The general seemed to be at a loss.

"I should like to see you for a moment privately, Señor Ransome," he said at length. "It is fortunate that I find you here."

Salty Bexar's sharp features suddenly seemed stern and his dislike for the ornately dressed Mexican impregnated every word with menace as he said, "Listen here, Perana, did you cut the

telephone line between here and Tampico?"

Perana's eyes opened with exaggerated astonishment. "Certainly not!" he said, spreading his hands helplessly.

"I'll see you in a minute, General," Ransome said crisply.

"Do not make it too long," Perana returned meaningly.

Russ felt a tingle along his spine. He found himself taut with a sense of impending crisis.

"Come in, gentlemen," Ransome said. They entered the bare office and the oil executive seated himself at the desk beside the second door.

"Hub reached me and I decided to come down immediately," he said, polishing his glasses. "I was the only one of the combined board who was available. Bexar has told me what has happened. Unquestionably you were right in suspecting General Perana's motives."

As he sat there, arrayed in a neat suit of tropical cloth and spotless white shirt, he seemed entirely out of keeping with his surroundings. The casually dressed flyers felt ill at ease. Suddenly the screen door was thrown open with a bang and General Perana stood in the doorway.

"I overheard you, Señor Ransome," he said, his fleshy face sullen.

His men were coming along the road now and an ever-increasing group of them was milling around a few yards from the office.

"What of it?" Ransome asked precisely.

"You should tell the truth, Señor. I——"

Suddenly Ransome was on his feet. "Get out, Perana. I'll talk to you later!" His eyes suddenly were like gimlets.

For a moment it seemed that Perana was about to say something else. Then the wrath that blazed forth from the ordinarily repressed oil man had its effect. The swashbuckling guerrilla chief stared down, left without a word.

Russ's mind was racing along, striving to grasp the situation. He felt undercurrents the meaning of which he could not comprehend. His eyes sought Duke Delroy's and what he saw there amazed him. Delroy was literally afire, but some of his careless joy was gone. His lips had thinned and his eyes were glued on Ransome.

"Now, gentlemen," Ransome said in low tones, still standing, "it is disappointing that the Hawk was not captured, but the main job at present is to save three hundred thousand dollars in cash. I feel certain that Perana is going to make a tremendous demand upon us— if he doesn't take all the money. The tribute we have been paying

him for two years has been half justified and half a species of blackmail, if you will. Your ships are hidden so that he can't get at them easily?"

"Yes," Russ told him.

"Then here is what we will do. The box of currency, Bexar, you say, is in the pump house?"

"Yes."

"I hate to ask you flyers to exert yourselves so soon," Ransome went on meticulously, "but it's necessary. I suggest that you slip out now, make your way to your ships, if possible, and get into the air. As soon as you are up, circling, I'll inform the general that if he gets nasty you'll shoot him up. Under cover of your machine guns, Hammond and I will put the money in our ship and take it back to Tampico. The object of its being here, of course, was to outwit robbery and now that so many people know of it, it can't stay here."

"Do I get this right, Mr. Ransome?" the Duke broke in. The blaze in his eyes seemed to communicate a sense of almost stifling excitement to Russ. "You are going to fly three hundred thousand dollars back to Tampico?"

"Exactly."

"You don't say?" Delroy said, so slowly that there was a pause between each word. "Wait a minute." Before anyone knew what he was about

to do he had leaped for the door. "Come in here, General," he shouted.

Perana, who had been talking with two of his men a short distance away, came toward the steps.

"What in the world are you up to, Duke?" Blackie Williams asked him in amazement.

Ransome stood at the desk without saying a word.

"I'll tell you in a minute," Delroy threw over his shoulder. "Come right in, General."

Everybody seemed to be waiting in puzzled wonder to find out what Delroy was up to, and for the moment the blond adventurer dominated the room.

"Sit down, General," Delroy invited, and the watchful Mexican did so. With one of those marvelously quick motions that almost outwitted the human eye, Delroy had seized one of Perana's enormous pistols, and using his own body to screen what he was doing from the gaze of the Mexicans outside, he had stuck it into Perana's ribs.

"Now listen, General, I'm not going to hurt you," he soothed the apoplectic guerrilla. "You knew this money was at this camp and you said you had orders to move it yourself. You must have found it out somewhere. Who told you just where the money was hidden? And tell the truth,

or by the mighty, I'll plug you where you sit and take my chances."

The men in the office froze into immovable statues. Perana's mouth fell open and for a second he stared at Delroy with mingled hate and fear in his eyes. Then, inevitably, his eyes roved to Ransome's.

"You don't need to tell me now," Delroy exulted. "It *was* Mr. Ransome, wasn't it?"

For a few seconds there was no answer. Then, as though literally forced to do it, Perana nodded his head.

"Why, this is ridiculous," snapped Ransome. "Delroy, this grandstand play——"

"Grandstand play, is it?" Delroy snapped. "Now listen, you, and everybody." He had whirled like a tiger, gun in hand. "You're going to hear some things, Mr. Ransome, right now, and the rest of you may be interested. Furthermore," and he threw a quick, flashing smile at Russ, "it's the Hawk speaking!"

CHAPTER XIII

IT SEEMED as though Delroy were the only man in the room and that no one else had the power to speak or move. Somehow, his announcement of his identity was not astonishing to Russ. The whole situation had taken on an Arabian Night's atmosphere in which nothing was impossible or even improbable. He saw the Mexican's eyes bulge and the icy Ransome's jaw drop momentarily. Blackie Williams breathed deeply, his breath hissing through his teeth.

Delroy glanced outside. Some of Perana's men were within fifteen yards of the doorway and the panorama without was that of an uneasily shifting army of men. The guerrillas were gathered in little groups, some lying wearily on the ground, others talking as they smoked hand-rolled cigarettes. That they were in no pleasant mood after their fruitless night's search was obvious.

"Now before I make my little speech," Delroy said swiftly, "we'll make a few arrangements."

In a trice he had removed Perana's second gun from its holster. Still using his own body to shield

the guns in his hand from the men without, his eyes roved over the group that was silently awaiting what he had to say. To an outside observer looking through the screened walls it would have been merely a group of men, some sitting, some standing, who were talking things over.

"Listen, Salty, and you, too, Blackie and Russ. There may still be some doubts in your mind as to which side I'm on. There needn't be. But if there are, don't plan on making any moves anyhow. Give me a chance—wait till I'm through. Ransome, if you so much as lift an eyebrow, it's going to be just too bad. Now listen, everybody."

He stopped again and that flashing grin illuminated his face. His instinct for the dramatic that had helped to make the fame of the Hawk resound through Mexico leaped to the fore. Desperate as the situation was, he was enjoying it to the hilt.

"I'm Arch Avery's brother, and likewise the Hawk," he stated. "Arch was ruined down in this country by trying to buck one company, the International Refining. He put everything he had into drilling a well. When it looked good and he wouldn't sell out his piece to the International, they got him. He couldn't even get water to pipe to his well. He had to stand by while he was beaten

down to the ground, sell out for a song and then see International Number Six, his well, come in at sixty-five thousand barrels, without doing him one dime's worth of good. You all know what I'm talking about. By every law of man he'd been legally robbed, and it broke him. I came down here and made up my mind with him that we'd get it back by hook or crook, and I turned into the Hawk. I told you how I disguised myself, Russ.

"I flew my own ship down here from the States, landed it in a spot that Arch had picked out. He's there now, just getting over the fever, a broken wreck of a man. Every time I think of it I could wring the necks of a certain number of people around here. Arch may be quick on the trigger, and they may not have liked him, but they had no license to ruin him the way they did. You know what I'm talking about, Blackie, even if we both are big company men now. Not all big companies are as bad, of course."

"I'll say," Blackie drawled, his eyelids so low that his eyes were almost invisible.

"Well, I didn't do so bad," Delroy went on. "There are an awful lot of people on my side, and I had fun. Got a great kick out of it. But it wasn't long after I started that I had competition."

Again that flashing grin eclipsed his face. "I hate to admit it, gentlemen, but I'm not the superman the Hawk's supposed to be for the simple reason that other people have been stealing my thunder. I've been getting credit for doing all the things that have been pulled off by an entirely separate airplane gang. I'm a lone wolf. The others have a little army. It was a cinch, when they started operating, that they had inside dope straight from headquarters. Evidently some big bug, having seen how easy I did it, thought it was a good scheme. It was a cinch to pick up a bunch of renegade flyers around Mexico City. Sound reasonable, Mr. Ransome?"

The executive didn't answer. His eyes behind his spectacles were as motionless as a fish's. He didn't even wink. He was like a man turned to stone. Perana breathed noisily, his huge hands gripping the sides of his chair as though the feel of solid wood proved to him that what he was going through was real and not a dream.

"I got away with being the Hawk," Delroy resumed, "because I had the excuse of trotting away to this funny well back up in the monte. I wasn't suspected of being Arch Avery's brother for the simple reason that my name is really Delroy and we're only half brothers. But things

began to get pretty hot for me when this reward was offered, and believe it or not, I commenced to grow a conscience."

He grinned as he said that, but somehow Russ sensed a sincerity in him that was not assumed.

"I've never killed anybody and wouldn't," he went on. "But somehow I felt responsible for the other gang. They got their idea from me. I tried to figure some way to get out of it—Arch and I talked it over for many a weary hour back in the monte. We were dragging in the dough all right and not spending a nickel of it except what was necessary to sink my well. But we were in bum business. What we planned to do was return every dime.

"Then the proposition of Blackie's came up. Blackie knew I was a pretty good flyer, and he asked me to help him hunt the Hawk—hunt myself! I took the job because I saw in it a chance to bag those other thugs, and in that way make partial restitution. Then, when I'd helped clean up the mess, I could go to the executives, return the money I'd taken, and take my chances.

"This may sound crazy, but remember this, Russ," his glowing eyes turned to Russ as though the red-headed flyer's opinion was the most important thing of all to him. "I didn't have to come

clean and admit—just now—that I was the Hawk, and what I'm saying under these conditions ought to have some weight, regardless of what you think of me."

Russ nodded.

"Listen, Duke," came Blackie's drawling tones. "Better hurry. Those hombres outside are liable to come in any minute. I think I know what you're getting at——"

"I'll hurry," the Duke cut in quickly, "but I might as well get it off my chest now so you'll understand what we're up against right in this camp this minute. As I said, I've known all along that there were other people operating under high leadership. I couldn't help but know it. And the minute Perana, here, wanted to move the money from this camp, I felt sure the general was also working under the same higher-up. I didn't know who the big bug concerned was, but I knew it could only have been one of about six men. Not more than that many know about secret pay roll movements. Finally I narrowed it down, by my own marvelous powers of deduction, to just two, and you, Ransome, were one of them. When you showed up with this new pilot here and pulled that gag about carrying the money off in a ship, I became certain of things.

"That money would no more have reached Tampico than I'll reach the moon to-morrow. A faked forced landing, a little financial generosity, and a hold-up yarn would have fixed that. Furthermore, now that we know what kind of a guy Ransome is, I don't think, General, that you and your men would have got your half of the dough by acting as Ransome's tool when his gang of thug flyers had failed. I think Mr. Ransome, after giving a little of it to Hammond here, would have salted it away and shortly resigned to spend a vacation in Europe.

"So now, gentlemen, you have the reason for my admitting that I'm the Hawk. I'm admitting it because I've saved the big companies about three hundred thousand dollars this minute and have helped knock off the flying outfit that's been costing them plenty, and all the rest of it. And when you talk to oil men, you've got to have such evidences of good will. I'm sorry to be a fathead, but I must point out to all of you that I, and I alone, am responsible for saving this dough if it's saved. None of the rest of you were wise to Ransome, and you wouldn't have stopped him from flying off with it."

Again he grinned as he said blithely, "I'll rest on the mercy of the court, as it were."

"Watch out, Duke," Russ said quickly. "Some men are coming up. Get in front of the general and Delroy, somebody."

Russ bounded to the door as Salty and Blackie walked over casually and ranged themselves between Perana and the doorway.

"The general will be out in just a minute," Russ answered the inquiry of one of the sombreroed Mexicans.

The man nodded sullenly and he and his companion sat down on the steps. Many of the general's ragged crew were looking impatiently at the office. Russ instinctively knew that they were anxious to get that money and be gone. Delroy realized it too. Ransome seemed as cold as ice, and he was gazing at Delroy with a stony stare that somehow had the venom of a snake in it. He seemed to realize the futility of speech. Delroy had been so carelessly positive in every statement that he gave the impression of absolutely accurate knowledge of the whole thing.

"Now listen, boys," Delroy said in low tones. He was talking swiftly and his voice had a quality compounded of tense anticipation and joyous excitement. "We've got to save this dough. I've got to, anyhow, or I'm a gone gosling. Here's what you do. Russ, you and Blackie go out the

side door and make for the ships. I'll stay here and hold the fort with these guns at least as long as I can, so that you can get in the air. One of you beat it for Tampico, send some ships down here and report to the Mexican authorities that General Perana and his men are just camouflaged bandits. The other one can stay in the air and hold this army back from that money and also from getting away. We——"

"But listen," Russ cut in, his voice breaking with excitement. "You can't do that! You're the first man they'll get. Salty and the others nobody's got a grudge against. Those people outside will get wise to the fact that their chief is being held here, they'll rescue him in a second, and the first thing they'll do is get even with you. You can't, I tell you!"

"Who says I can't?" Delroy grinned quizzically. "There's no need of getting Salty or anybody else in this mess by handing over the guns to him. It's my little job and I'm going to do it."

"Why not let me stay and you fly?" Russ exploded. "Duke, you're sticking your head right into the lion's mouth——"

"O. K., my boy, but I might get loose," Delroy grinned. "I'm doing this, and I'm taking my one shot at making up for the past. Don't give me too

much credit. I'm looking out for Number One. And get going, man!"

"Listen, everybody," Russ said in low tones that would not reach the men outside. His eyes burned into the opaque black ones of General Perana. "I'll be in the air in a few minutes and if one hair on the head of Delroy is harmed, I'm going to go through your whole army with machine guns and mow you down like so many weeds, do you understand?"

There was no answer. It seemed that Perana had lost the power of speech. He wet his lips with his tongue and nodded slowly.

"Get it?" Russ snapped at Hammond.

"Sure," rasped the pilot. "This is all a pipe dream to me."

"You remember it, too, Ransome," Russ fairly snarled into the oil man's face. "Ready, Blackie?"

"Right!" Blackie answered and there was a note in his voice that Russ had never heard there before. Blackie Williams would be a hard man to buck in the next few minutes.

As the two flyers walked casually out the side door, Russ felt as though he were almost suffocated. Nothing was harder than to walk slowly and casually across the clearing under the eyes of two hundred restless men who suddenly seemed

to have sensed that something was wrong. Back there in that office, Duke Delroy, the Hawk, in the very centre of enemies who would have delighted in tearing him to pieces, was holding an army with two guns. As they approached the mesquite Russ had an almost ungovernable impulse to break into a run. The moment that one of Perana's subordinates realized what was happening within the office, the game was up. He looked around.

"It won't be long now," he gulped to Blackie. "Those two men are on the top step, opening the door."

"Let's go," Blackie almost shouted as he broke into a run. "I don't give a hoot about the money—we've got to save a *man!*"

CHAPTER XIV

THEY got into the air just in time. Russ blessed the lucky thought that had caused them to move the ships, because as his Bullet followed Blackie's down the roadway, a group of fifteen Mexicans, riding like mad, swept into sight. Exactly what had happened back at the camp he could not tell, but that Perana and Ransome had been rescued by Perana's men was a certainty.

Blackie roared away northward toward Tampico. There had been a short, almost bitter, argument as to who should go to Tampico. Russ had won. Blackie could waste no time in assisting Russ even for a few minutes. It would be more than two hours, under the very best conditions, before relief ships could get back from Tampico. The moment Russ ran out of gas, of course, the outlaws on the ground would have a chance for escape.

During the few seconds when Russ was banking his ship and racing back toward the camp,

scarcely two hundred feet high, there was but one thought in mind—Duke Delroy. No matter what the Duke had been, he was a friend—a friend in deadly peril.

With a sweep of his eyes he took in the scene being enacted on the ground. How the indomitable Delroy had done it he did not know, but certain it was that the gay flyer was on horseback, riding wildly through the mesquite that skirted the rim of the camp. He was heading for the general direction of the landing field. He was staying in the mesquite using it as a screen against bullets, and behind him were a half dozen Mexicans striving to overtake him.

The rest of Perana's men seemed to be rushing aimlessly. There was wild activity as little groups split off from the main bunch, scooting in every direction. Then he got the meaning of it. They were scattering in an endeavor to escape. They were trying to make it impossible for Russ to round them up.

A group that included the general was carrying a wooden box that evidently held the money. For a second, Russ circled over the clearing unaware of scattered firing from the ground. He saw Hammond and Ransome rushing toward their ship. They were on foot. Strangely enough,

Russ had almost forgotten that there was another airplane involved in the situation.

Then everything clicked suddenly into place in his mind and he knew exactly what he would do. In an instant he had turned his ship, which was now five hundred feet high, and was diving it at the ground, pouring a shower of bullets into the earth a few dozen yards in front of the group that was pursuing Delroy. The Mexicans dragged their horses to a stop instantly. Russ fired a few farewell bursts at them, and as he did so he got a glimpse of Delroy waving congratulations at him and pointing toward the field. Delroy could get away now into the monte, but he didn't go. Why?

Russ couldn't bother to think of that. He was hurtling toward the field, now, leaning forward tensely as though to help his ship along. Delroy was safe. That was enough, plus the situation itself, to turn Russ into a reckless, flaming flyer who was in the very seventh heaven. His blood was racing and his eyes were bright as stars as he fairly hurled his ship toward the plane on the ground, wrecking it with bullets as Hammond and Ransome stopped in their tracks, their way of escape cut off. In a second the airplane on the ground was afire as the bullets found the gas tank,

and Russ, barely two hundred feet high, was rushing to stop a brigade of fifty riders who were about to find shelter in the monte.

For two minutes he sped like an aërial range rider rounding up groups of cattle. But he couldn't efficiently keep track of them all, and suddenly he reflected, "What do I care about all those bandits? It's Perana, Ransome, Hammond, that I've got to watch out for." And those men he did watch out for.

He fairly ringed the spot where Perana and a few of his men were riding, and they stopped, helpless. It was not an easy feat, for Russ had to avoid hitting the pumping station employees. Around the various wells they were standing open-mouthed, without the sense to run for shelter.

Russ was flying very low and there was continuous sniping at him from the ground. Back and forth he weaved between Hammond and Ransome and Perana, keeping a watchful eye about him. They seemed to have given up hope of escape. Hammond and Ransome were now on horseback, sitting quietly. So were Perana and his group of men. By this time the rest of the Mexican bandits had disappeared into the monte. The job seemed to be done.

"There's nothing to do now," Russ thought exultantly, "but sit here until my gas runs out. And Blackie or somebody will be back before then."

His eyes searched the ground for Delroy and finally found him. Delroy was at the edge of the flying field, beckoning upward. Russ flew over and as he dipped low over the field, keeping an eye on his three temporary captives the while, he saw that Delroy wanted him to land.

"Delroy's in a tough spot even yet," Russ mused. "Practically any one of those guerrillas would pot him on sight out of revenge. Some of them may be sneaking up on him from the monte now."

A quick glance assured him that Perana, Ransome and Hammond were making no move to escape. He banked around and a moment later was landing. Delroy was rushing toward the ship. His face was fairly radiant and Farrell's own was shining with joyous satisfaction as Delroy threw himself from his horse into the back cockpit.

"O. K., boy," he shouted joyously. "What a day's work this is, eh what?"

An instant later Russ was taking off again—just in time. His eyes sought the three men that

were so important to him, and as he saw what was happening, he turned to Delroy and pointed. Hammond was still sitting quietly, and three men who were evidently oil men were coming toward him to capture him. Employees of the pumping station were surrounding Perana. But Ransome had not given up so easily. He was riding like mad for the mesquite.

It didn't take Russ more than five seconds to overtake him. Bullets started kicking up the dust in front of the fleeing oil man. But Ransome didn't stop. Russ turned and looked at Delroy and the Duke shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands. There was no need for conversation between the two. The Duke evidently would not stop now for bullets. He'd rather be dead, apparently, than captured. Three times more Russ fired in front of him but always Ransome rode on. Russ stopped firing and took a minute to circle above the fugitive and get altitude. Then he cut the gun in order to speak to Delroy.

"He won't stop," he shouted, "and I can't kill him, Duke!"

Delroy nodded. "I know what you mean," he shouted back. "We want him alive anyway. He's the key to the whole trouble. We need his testimony—his confession! Hammond won't know

anything important, probably, or Perana either."

Russ, gliding his ship gently, nodded his agreement. Perana and Hammond were probably just odd job men. Ransome was the brains of a conspiracy much wider than even his handy men would suspect.

Delroy was standing up in the rear cockpit, leaning over so that his mouth was close to Russ's ear.

"You're sitting on your 'chute, aren't you?" he inquired, glancing downward, and Russ nodded. For a moment Delroy outlined the plan that had occurred to him to make certain of capturing Ransome alive; when he had finished, Russ merely nodded and shoved the throttle all the way ahead. It seemed to be the only way out. That Ransome should be made a captive was unquestionably of the utmost importance. That he had evidently decided either to escape or be killed was equally self-evident, but the chance that Duke Elroy was about to take—as the very climax of a thrill-packed life—was one that made the red-headed Farrell's face grim and set.

The Duke was strapping on his 'chute now. They were a mile or so behind Ransome. The oil man was riding a straight course, apparently with the sole idea of losing himself as far as

possible in the monte. It was almost useless for the flyers to try to keep him in sight, because the moment they left him to go back and inform the relief ship where he was, he could hide himself in that luxuriant jungle. But where he was now the monte wasn't thick. Now was the time to get him.

There were three or four small clearings, two of them showing the black stub of an abandoned well. The time had come for Delroy to make his jump—a terrifically dangerous one. Russ felt as though he could not bear the ordeal much longer, for Delroy, whatever he might have been, had earned his way into a precious niche in Farrell's heart.

The jump had to be made from a very low altitude to keep Ransome, if possible, from knowing that an enemy was dropping on him. Trusting to Ransome's evident intention of pursuing a straight course, Russ took the ship five miles ahead of him and only four hundred feet high. Then Russ looked back at the Duke. A four hundred foot parachute jump! His heart caught.

For a moment their eyes met and held. Delroy's hand was raised in a casual gesture of farewell as he got up on the seat. The next second he had jerked the rip-cord ring and had been whisked

into the air. There was a jar that shook the ship in every strut and spar as his body hit the vertical fin. The next second Delroy was dropping earthward, swinging so terrifically that his body was higher than his 'chute at the crest of each arc. That was the peril! The chances were ten to one that he would still be swinging when he hit the ground, and should he reach it on a down swing, serious injury was almost a certainty.

Only for a second, though, did Russ watch his comrade. Then he became aware that his ship was acting peculiarly. It seemed to be wobbling around in the air. He moved rudder and stick in an effort to control it. They seemed to have little effect. He forced himself to look back at the tail surfaces. The story was written there, plainly. Delroy's body, smashing into them, had crumpled the rudder and one elevator. One control wire seemed to be useless. Evidently the hinges that attached the controls to vertical fin and horizontal stabilizer had been twisted so that they would barely move. He must come down, for he couldn't raise his synchronized elevators enough to overcome the weight of the motor!

He shoved the throttle all the way ahead—he had had the motor throttled to fifteen hundred revolutions—and as the ship gradually came level

Russ gave a great gasp of relief. It was not a matter of a straight nose dive into the ground then——

He looked down at Delroy. The Duke was still swinging and Russ forgot himself and his own peril as his eyes followed Delroy to the ground. During the last ten seconds, oblivious to his crazily acting ship, he kept his eyes on his friend, unable even to breathe. Delroy would hit the small clearing, all right, but would he be swinging?

There was brooding tragedy in Russ's clear blue eyes as he saw the inevitable happen. Delroy's body swung down to the ground, sprawled out almost horizontally. A slight breeze caught the 'chute and dragged its limp human burden across the clearing until the silk wrapped itself around a tree. There was a slight movement then, and it seemed that the Duke was trying to struggle to his feet. But he was evidently weak and badly hurt. Russ's throat choked.

But he could take no more time to look. His ship had fallen off into a half slip, half tail spin. Perhaps the Duke, after all, was the lucky one. And yet he must make one last effort to get Ransome. He could see the fugitive, now a mile away, through the trees. Again the motor went all the way on and the jammed rudder moved reluct-

antly as he pitted all his strength against it. Slowly the ship started level, two hundred feet high, until it was headed straight toward the horseman below.

Ever so gently, Russ eased back on the stick. There was no chance to maneuver for a clearing. He must crash into the trees straight ahead. Looking almost certain death squarely in the eye, the stalwart pilot settled down to fly with all the matchless skill that was his. Using the throttle with infinite delicacy, and tugging at that almost useless stick, he succeeded in bringing the ship up with its undercarriage almost scraping the trees. Fate helped him a little——

Ahead of him was a stretch of jungle that was like a matted green carpet. Fifty yards back of it, and barely five feet higher than the tops of the trees and vines, he cut the throttle, relaxed every muscle in his body, and covered his face with his arms. A second later the ship was ripping into the tops of the trees. It slowed as a man's body does when it hits the water, and Russ was thrown forward heavily. His belt wrenched him badly, but it held. His arm partly saved his face.

For a second the universe was a mad thing as the ship ripped and tore down through the undergrowth. Russ, curled up like a porcupine inside

the cockpit, waited bloodily for it to stop. A last crash, as a wing crumpled on the ground, and he found himself hanging head downward, his face cut and bleeding from a bush into which his head had been thrust. But he was alive—anyhow.

In the great wave of relief that swept over him, his mind started functioning again. Painfully, he dragged himself from the wreck, and careless of his aching arm, and a twisted leg, and a pain in his stomach that almost bent him double, he started to work on the scarf mount around the rear seat. In a few seconds he had his Lewis guns free. He carried them into a clump of bushes and pointed them toward the direction from which Ransome was coming, if he did come. Then he dropped flat on the ground as though he had been thrown there from the wreck. One hand was on the trigger of the gun, concealed in the bush, but his body was in plain sight.

What he had figured might happen did happen. Ransome, of course, had seen the wreck and doubtless could not conceive of a man's coming through it safely. That, plus curiosity, perhaps, had kept him from altering his course. He rode forward warily. Russ did not move. Finally satisfied, the oil man got off his horse and came

forward. He was still fifteen yards away when Russ gathered himself. He flung his body into the clump of undergrowth that shielded the guns and the next second the machine gun spoke.

He fired into the air above Ransome's head. The oil man stopped as though turned to stone and Russ's voice rang out as he ceased firing.

"Not a move, Mr. Ransome, or I'll start shooting low. Come forward slowly and drop your gun."

It was one week later, to a day, at eight o'clock in the evening in the Tampico Country Club, when Messrs. Blackie Williams and Duke Delroy, together with Lieutenant Russell Farrell, held their first reunion. Delroy, not seriously hurt in his parachute drop, had been out of the hospital three days, but they had been very busy days for him. Russ, unable to walk after his capture of Ransome, had been picked up by a rescue party after three hours in the monte, and had spent the remaining time in a bed in Rebrache. He had seen Blackie frequently, but this evening was the first time he and the Duke had met since that eventful twenty-four hours a week before.

The red-headed pilot was feeling exceptionally well as he sat with his two comrades at a secluded table on the screened end of the porch. For them

the rest of the world didn't exist. Russ learned that Ransome had made a complete confession and that a round-up of dishonest employees in subordinate positions, from field men to office men, had been accomplished. That a huge conspiracy, which had cost the companies many hundreds of thousands of dollars, had been responsible for protected banditry on the part of Sancho Perana, seemed like a tale from a book.

"I see you're a respectable citizen again, Duke, eh?" Russ grinned. Somehow that to Russ seemed infinitely more important at the moment than that oil field banditry had been stopped.

"Yeah," drawled Blackie mockingly. "And how it hurt the boy to pay in all that dough he'd stolen!"

"Not so much," grinned Delroy. "Look what they paid back to me!"

"Did you have much trouble?" Russ inquired.

"Not a bit, as a matter of fact," Delroy told him. "Compared to Ransome and his gang of bookkeepers, flyers, Mexican generals and field superintendents, I was just a romantic but unimportant figure. Boy, what I was getting credit for around these fields was plenty!"

"You were the same kind of a sap," Blackie said unkindly, "that I was a year ago. It's enough

to drive a man crazy to know he has been swindled out of a fortune and has no way of getting it back. But he certainly is crazy if he thinks that crooked work can win."

For a minute Delroy's face was serious.

"You're right," he admitted. "I went about it in the wrong way. And yet every dime of the money I took belonged by rights to Arch and me. I took it only from those who had taken it first from us."

"This reform stuff of yours," Blackie told him caustically, but with a humorous gleam in his eyes, "doesn't exactly jibe with your coming back into Rebrache to steal one of our ships. You were supposed to be all reformed when you pulled that one."

"Oh, that!" Delroy grinned, looking at Russ. "I did it for two reasons. One was so that I might have an opportunity to ease into the rival gang—if there were any left—and get them from within. They might willingly accept a man who pulled a stunt like that. The second reason was that it seemed such a good joke on Russ and all of you that I couldn't resist making a grandstand play. Gosh, how I enjoyed it!"

"That was plain to be seen," Russ told him with a grin. "It took the nerve of the very devil,

but you were certainly getting a kick out of it."

"I'll admit that I've got a kick out of the whole business of being the Hawk," Delroy admitted blithely. "Holding the center of the stage and acting up to my part made me feel like king of the herd for a while. But deep inside I had a sneaking feeling that I was a low-down thug. And that wasn't pleasant."

"How did you come to write those notes?" Russ demanded. "I never did ask you about that."

"Two reasons, my boy, two reasons," laughed Delroy, digging into his salad with gusto. In a white flannel suit and white shirt he looked more like a blond college boy than he did like Duke Delroy, alias the Hawk. "One was that I really would have liked to scare you out—I wanted to make my amends unhampered and particularly uncaptured. The other reason was that I got a kick out of it, like any practical joke. That parachute stuff, of course, was pure accident, and I just took a chance to have a laugh on everybody by planting that note."

"Where did I come in on that?" drawled Blackie. "You certainly put me through a course of sprouts—made Russ think I was the Hawk——"

"What could I do?" Delroy interrupted. "I

had to let you get suspected to save my own skin. I wouldn't have let it go too far—I'd have cleared you, never worry. But I'm sorry. I made a fool of myself all the way along."

They talked on casually, steeped in deep contentment. Russ continually marvelled at those chaotic hours, but out of them there emerged but one outstanding personage—the indomitable, incomprehensible, unexplainable combination of devil-may-care youth and first-class fighting man—Duke Delroy. Russ would never have done what Delroy had, but he could understand how the Duke's hot resentment at the ruining of his brother had thrown him headlong into methods that were legally wrong. Somehow, he recalled a poem he had read somewhere, about, "A race of men that don't fit in, a race that can't stay still." That was Duke.

Dinner was over, and as they drove back to town under a glorious midnight moon, Russ was silent and distraught. He was leaving early next morning by boat and had to be aboard that night. Delroy was going back to his well and Blackie was to continue his work as general field man for White's company. That huge oil executive, stunned by what had been uncovered, had not only accepted restitution from Delroy but had

gone so far as to roar with laughter at the narrative of the pilot's escapades.

"I'm going to see you in the States in a month or so, eh, Blackie?" Russ said with an effort, as they stood on the dock. Williams nodded.

"I'm depending on you," he drawled, "to be my assistant on my vacation."

"And you, Duke, when are you stepping northward?" Russ asked him, and their eyes held steadily.

"Well, now that's hard to tell," the Duke said softly as he crushed Russ's hand. "I hate to make plans because I never know from one day to the other what I want to do. But I'll be seeing you around. Sometime, some place, somehow. *Buenos noches, adiós,* and all that sort of thing."

Russ walked up the gangplank and on up to the top deck. He leaned at the rail, taking a last look at the spot he was leaving with so many memories in his mind. The plazas of Tampico were alight, and across the river the terminal of the Texas Company was visible in a thousand winking lights. Down the river, the tank farms loomed vaguely, and from tiny illuminated boats on the water's surface came the tinkle of guitars and the liquid laugh of childlike Mexicans returning from an evening's holiday.

Suddenly the army pilot's stalwart body straightened and he strained his ears to be sure that he heard correctly. From far down the dock, ringing clearly above the noises from the river and the town, came the strains that were never to be erased from Russ's memory. It was Duke Delroy's voice, riding on the river breeze:

"Ah've give up de debil, an' Ah've give up mah fun,
Ah wants to rest in He'ben when mah work's done,
Pharaoh's army got drownded,
Oh, Mary, don' you weep."

There was a funny tightness in Russ's chest and a suspicious film over his eyes, but he was grinning nevertheless.

"He'll get no rest short of heb'n—not that boy," Russ told himself, as he walked toward his stateroom. "But I think I'll get mine—now."

THE END

RUSS FARRELL, *Over Mexico*

BURTIS

DOUBLEDAY DORAN